The New Criterion

January 2000

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: January 2000

Postscript to "Sensation"

"O what a tangled web we weave/ When first we practise to deceive!" It is a pity that no one introduced Arnold Lehman—as of this writing, still the director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art—to these thoughtful lines by Sir Walter Scott. They might have saved him a lot of trouble. Mr. Lehman hoped that the exhibition "Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection" would be a public relations coup for the Brooklyn Museum. It had everything going for it: not only works of art that were disgusting, blasphemous, and pornographic, but also (since such objects are dime-a-dozen in the art world today) the oppositon of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The mayor's opposition to the exhibition was a godsend. In the eyes of the so-called "arts community" and other redoubts of self-righteousness, it transformed the battle over "Sensation" into a free speech issue. For a brief and shining moment, "Sensation" was the liberal cause du jour and Arnold Lehman was its hero.

But that was before *The New York Observer* and *The New York Times* revealed the extensive and indeed tangled web that Mr. Lehman wove in order to get "Sensation" into the Brooklyn Museum. First, there was the issue of Charles Saatchi's involvement. At the end of October, a long front-page story in the *Times*—based in part on an earlier story in the *Observer*—rang some alarm bells: "Brooklyn Museum Recruited Donors Who Stood To Gain," ran the headline.

> Far more than has been previously disclosed, the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art has been financed by companies and individuals with a direct commercial interest in the works of the British artists in the show, according to court documents and interviews with people involved in the exhibition.

Oh dear.

> Mr. Lehman and his assistants [the *Times* story continued] solicited donations of at least $10,000 from dealers who represented many of the artists whose works are on display. They offered Christie's special access to the museum to entertain clients. They secured a pledge of $160,000 from Mr. Saatchi and then tried to conceal his financial support from the public.

It gets worse. Early in December the *Times* ran another long, front-page story under the headline "Art, Money and Control: Elements of an Exhibition." Mr. Lehman has strenuously maintained that (as the *Times* put it) "commercial considerations had never entered his discussions with those who donated money to the exhibition," and that the most important element of artistic

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control for a musuem is deciding what works of art are worthy of exhibition. How odd, then, that Mr. Lehman should have given Charles Saatchi "a central role in determining the artistic content of 'Sensation,' so much so that senior museum officials repeatedly expressed concerns that Mr. Saatchi had usurped control of the exhibition."

Mr. Lehman said that he decided to try to get "Sensation" for the Brooklyn Museum after seeing the show at the Royal Academy in London and being impressed both by the art and the long lines of people waiting to see the show. Well, not quite. It turns out, as the *Times* reports, that "Mr. Lehman was not as informed about 'Sensation' as he has suggested. The documents show, and the museum now concedes, that Mr. Lehman never actually saw 'Sensation' in London." "Never actually saw"?

Mr. Lehman "adamantly insisted that there was no link between his seeking sponsorship from Christie's and his discussion of auctioning works from the museum's collection." But at a lunch with Mr. Lehman, Christie's executives "'jokingly suggested' that Christie's might underwrite 'Sensation' in exchange for handling the Brooklyn Museum's future art sales 'on an exclusive basis.'" As the president of Christie's America put it in a memo: "There might be something here worth exploring." Weeks later, Christie's handled a sale of $21,000 worth of art for the Brooklyn Museum—a small sale, to be sure, but of sufficient interest to Christie's that the head of Christie's International then told Charles Saatchi in a memo that he had decided to sponsor "Sensation" since "we were given quite a lot of property from the Brooklyn Museum for sale."

There are other embarrassing details. Last August, Mr. Lehman sought support for the exhibition from the Third Millennium Foundation. He assured the foundation that he had already secured "several gifts" of up to $350,000. Again, not quite: "As the museum now acknowledges, this statement was false." Then there was the memo from the Brooklyn Museum's vice director for development. He described the budget for "Sensation" as "completely artificial." But foundations and other potential sources of support should not worry about that: Mr. Lehman explained that "totally artificial" was "the museum's internal shorthand for 'ballpark estimates.'"

Enough. Forget about Sir Walter Scott. Mr. Lehman clearly subscribes to the philosophy of Humpty Dumpty: "When *I* use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." It worked for Bill Clinton. We rather doubt that Mr. Lehman will be quite so fortunate in arguing that "it all depends what the meaning of 'is' is."

Patterns of pedagogic abuse

The ethic of "vote early, vote often" seems to have insinuated itself tenaciously into New York City schools. Just as corrupt politicians of yore (but not, alas, all *that* yore) would trawl the cemeteries for names to put on the voting rolls, so it now turns out that several New York City schools have been habitually inflating student attendance figures—a primary factor in determining how much state aid a school receives. Governor George Pataki said that a state investigation had uncovered "patterns of widespread, systemic abuse" in reporting attendance figures to the state, which in turn has cost the taxpayer millions. In one case, *The New York Times* reported, a student died in the summer but was kept on the school rolls for the entire academic year. He was even issued report cards. (Doubtless he got an "A" for deportment.) To put the scandal in perspective, the report noted that if city schools inflated attendance by 3 per-

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cent, it could cost the taxpayer $300 million over five years.

The attendance scandal comes fast on the heels of another school scandal. Only a week earlier Edward F. Stancik, special investigator for city schools, released a report charging that teachers and principals in eighteen of New York City's thirty-three school districts had helped students cheat on standardized tests. Forty-seven principals, teachers, and staff were implicated in the scandal. Teachers used palm-sized crib notes and what the *The New York Times* described as "overzealous coaching" to help students. Describing the procedure, one mathematics teacher noted that, in order to avoid detection by the test scorers, particularly difficult questions had asterisks next to them. "These were the hard questions," he said, "and I was told not to help with those. The kids were expected to get them wrong."

Teachers would also have students write answers on blank notebook paper and then, with the teachers' help, fill in the circles on standardized test sheets. The *Times* reported that at P.S. 234 in the Bronx, the principal, Evelyn Hey, "walked around the room during a third-grade reading exam, telling students, 'That's wrong,' or, 'Do that one over.'" *Mirabile dictu*, average reading scores in Ms. Hey's school rose by 22 percent from 1997 to 1998. In response to questioning by reporters, Ms. Hey said: "I'm not at liberty to say anything about it. It is all based on hearsay." According to the *Times*, she then ordered a reporter to leave the building, and minutes later "drove off in her Jaguar." (This is not the first time Ms. Hey has intruded herself on public notice. The *Times* noted that in 1993 she was removed from her post after an investigation found that she had been hired because she was the girlfriend of a former school board member. She was later reinstated.)

New York is not the only place where teachers and principals have colluded in helping students cheat on standardized texts. The *Times* mentioned several other malefactors from Texas to Fairfield, Connecticut. But the New York City scandal seems to feature the most systematic and widespread abuse. Together with the scandal over attendance figures, it has led Governor Pataki and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to come together in their demand that the city's board of education be abolished. We have no opinion on whether that is the appropriate response to this new series of scandals. It seems clear, however, that the educational establishment in New York and elsewhere is suffering from endemic corruption. Given that such abuses are rife in our country's schools, is it any wonder that kindred economies with truth and candor have found their way into more august cultural institutions like the Brooklyn Museum of Art?

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The perils of activism: Ken Saro-Wiwa

by Anthony Daniels

The last time I visited the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa in Port Harcourt, two years before he was hanged in the city's prison, the naked corpse of a man lay on the sidewalk of the Aggrey Road, about a hundred yards from his office. Broiling in the noonday sun, the body was so inflated by the gases of decomposition that it looked as if it might ascend to heaven of its own accord, in a halo of black flies.

Meanwhile, the radio appealed for the "owner" of the corpse, which had so far remained unclaimed for three days, to take it away as it was causing a public nuisance. All things considered, however, life seemed to be proceeding around it normally enough, as if a naked corpse in the street were nothing very remarkable. Which in Nigeria, perhaps, it isn't.

I mentioned the corpse to Saro-Wiwa, who was only too aware of its presence nearby, and of the unavailing radio appeals to the public spirit of its owner. Though he was only small in stature, Saro-Wiwa's basso profundo laugh shook the whole room. Whenever he laughed, it was with every fiber of his body: as if he had somehow understood the absurdity not just of Nigeria, but of existence itself. For above all, life was funny.

We discussed how the hallucinatory nature of everyday reality in Nigeria provided Nigerian writers with inexhaustible subject matter for their work, but Saro-Wiwa said that there were few writers nowadays to take advantage of it. The extraordinary flowering of Nigerian literature just before and after independence was over: not only had economic conditions rendered the printing or importation of books difficult and restricted the size of the market, but the degeneration of the educational system also meant that few people in the country were now equipped to write or even to read.

Saro-Wiwa was a member of a fortunate generation of Nigerians who received a classical British education at the famous school of Umuahia, among whose alumni are Chinua Achebe and several other eminent writers. Saro-Wiwa's career since then had been varied. He started out as a university teacher of English, but then became a high-ranking civil servant, on the federal side, during the Nigerian civil war. After the war he went into business as a grocer in order to achieve financial independence. (Unlike many intellectuals, he was unembittered by the need to support himself other than by the pen, and spoke with genuine pleasure of his time as a shopkeeper, for in Nigeria, as he once remarked, a freelance writer is one who writes for free.)

Having secured his independence, he started to write, self-publishing his novels, essays, short stories, plays, and poems. He also financed, wrote, directed, and produced the most popular television series in Nigeria, "Basi and Company," which ran for five years and was watched with intense en-

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joyment by some 30 million of his countrymen.

But now, he told me, the time for writing was over: the situation demanded action, not words. In the last few years he had become a political activist at the expense of all literary work except for polemics and propaganda. He regretted this, for there had recently come to light a local scandal which would have served as the perfect vehicle for the literary exposure of Nigeria's get-rich-quick mentality. A pyramid savings scheme in Port Harcourt, in which fantastically high monthly rates of interest were paid with new depositors' money, had just collapsed, as was inevitable, and it transpired that almost everyone had fallen for the fraud, from market trading women to the military governor, from peasant farmers to university professors and church pastors. But his novel about it would now have to wait until he had secured justice for his people, a more urgent task than mere imaginative writing could ever be.

I felt uneasy as Saro-Wiwa told me this, but as a visitor to his country, no doubt ill-informed, I was not in a strong position to argue with him, though I tried my best. I had a presentiment for a number of reasons that his political activism would lead to disaster, though I did not guess that it would lead to his death.

Saro-Wiwa's tribe, the Ogoni, numbers about half-a-million people living in an area of four-hundred square miles in the delta of the River Niger. Unfortunately for them, their land of forests and creeks was discovered in the 1950s to be oil-bearing. According to Saro-Wiwa, the oil companies —principally Shell—have extracted $30 billion worth of oil from Ogoniland in the last thirty years, in the process degrading the soil, polluting the water, and causing the Ogonis to live under the eternal light of gas flares. And the Nigerian federal government to which Shell paid enormous royalties has spent none of them on Ogoniland, which remains without proper roads, schools, clinics, or facilities of any kind. Instead, the royalties have lined private pockets and built an extravagantly luxurious new capital at Abuja.

"The rascals, the rascals!," Saro-Wiwa exclaimed, and shook the room again with his laughter. *Rascal* is a word that is generally used with a degree of affection, so what Saro-Wiwa said next was all the more shocking. "They'll kill me, you know. They'll kill me."

I didn't believe him. Nigeria was a military dictatorship, of course, as it has been for most of the time since independence, but the country was simply too large, diverse, and administratively disorganized, and its population too irrepressible, for it to be a proper dictatorship, of the kind in which political conversations are conducted only in whispers in dark corners. "They'll never do that," I said. "They don't kill writers in Nigeria." I knew, of course, that the death penalty was applied, and applied frequently, in Nigeria. Indeed, on my very first day in the country, seven years before, arriving overland from Northern Cameroon, I discovered the city of Maiduguri entirely deserted for everyone was away at the public executions held on the municipal execution grounds outside the city. In the evening, I watched the three executed men give their last television interview as they were being tied to the stake. One proclaimed his innocence, another wished he could have spoken to his mother before he died. The firing squad took up its positions about two yards from the condemned men, and according to the television commentary the firing lasted two minutes: after which, it said, a doctor, who by then must surely have required few diagnostic skills, pronounced them dead.

But these were armed robbers, not members of the Nigerian intellectual elite who had many friends abroad. (Only later did I learn that the Nigerian police often rented out their weapons nightly to armed robbers, when they did not actually commit the armed robberies themselves.) So while I could envisage the imprisonment of Saro-Wiwa, I could not envisage his execution. I

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was wrong. Saro-Wiwa had founded an organization, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which challenged the Nigerian state at its two most tender, vulnerable, and explosive points: the distribution of the oil revenues—more than 90 percent of its foreign earnings—and the ethnic question. MOSOP, which spread like wildfire, was soon able to mount a demonstration attended by 60 percent of the population of Ogoniland. Saro-Wiwa demanded that each ethnic group in Nigeria be given a say *qua* ethnic group in the government, and that each such group gain control of the mineral resources of its own land. He was not an ethnic separatist, but objected to the permanent political and economic domination of Nigeria by the larger ethnic groups, especially the Muslim northerners, who consumed a great deal but produced little.

It wasn't difficult to think of objections to Saro-Wiwa's ideas. Sometimes he said there were 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria, sometimes 300. What, then, counted as a distinct ethnic group with its own political and financial rights? When so much depended on the answer, the mere question would in itself generate a lot of conflict. Moreover, the establishment of a rich but tiny ethnic enclave in the midst of poverty, such as Ogoniland would have become if Saro-Wiwa's proposals were put into practice, seemed hardly a recipe for peace in Nigeria. The country's oil resources, upon which its 100 million people have come disastrously to depend for their daily sustenance, were highly concentrated, geographically speaking. The question of who was to control them had already generated one civil war: might it not easily generate another?

Saro-Wiwa argued that the situation in Ogoniland was already so catastrophic that it could get no worse, that it amounted to slow genocide and therefore that something had to be done about it at once, before it was too late. But I was suspicious of the idea that things could get no worse. Human ingenuity in causing disaster is almost infinite, no matter how low the starting point, and in neighboring Liberia I had seen with my own eyes what could be achieved by the thirst for power disguised as the need to ameliorate conditions that allegedly could get no worse: scores of thousands killed, three-quarters of the population displaced, and the infrastructure totally destroyed. Was it not likely that, in Nigerian conditions, a mass movement such as MOSOP would end in violence and intimidation, however pacific its leaders' intentions? Saro-Wiwa was confident on this score, but in the event it was the violence of some of his followers that gave the military government the pretext to execute him.

On May 21, 1994, several Ogoni elders who were not entirely in agreement with Saro-Wiwa's methods decided to meet in the town of Giokoo in Ogoniland. Saro-Wiwa was due to attend, but was turned away by soldiers before he could reach the meeting. Some of his young supporters, enraged by this, brutally killed four of the elders and burnt their bodies. Saro-Wiwa, along with fourteen others, was charged with their murder. By any reasonable standard, the charges against him were not proved, but the military government, by now in the hands of by far the most ruthless of all Nigeria's military presidents, General Sani Abacha—who had been Saro-Wiwa's friend during the civil war and who had unsuccessfully offered him the job of oil minister in his government to bribe him to desist from his campaign—was determined to rid itself of this troublesome writer and activist. Ten days after being found guilty, he was executed with eight of the other defendants. It has been alleged that Abacha had the execution recorded on video for his private satisfaction.

World outrage at the execution was intense but shallow—as usual. There were calls for sanctions against Nigeria, but it was far from certain whom these would harm if applied. The idea that sanctions should be applied to a country because it had executed a writer known to and friendly with intellectuals outside its borders, while

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for years the execution of large numbers of unknown men in the most dubious of circumstances had evoked not the slightest expression of concern, suggested that—their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding—intellectuals did not believe that all human lives were of equal worth, and really cared only about people like themselves.

Precisely as I had expected, the situation in Ogoniland deteriorated after the establishment of MOSOP. According to the organization's own reports (perhaps exaggerated for propaganda purposes), several thousand Ogoni have now been killed in Ogoniland and many thousands more made homeless by Nigerian security forces. Worse still, similar movements have been started in other oil-producing parts of Nigeria, with similar results. What countervailing good has come of this harm?

Saro-Wiwa was the best of company: anecdotes poured from him without cease. In his presence, it was impossible to feel anything other than that life was infinitely interesting, varied, and enjoyable. But in turning to practical politics, it seemed to me that he betrayed his own insight: for the singlemindedness of his mass movement represented an impoverishment rather than an enrichment of life. It also contradicted the message of his own first book, *Sozaboy* (Addison-Wesley, 1995), which is one of the great antiwar novels of the century, by which he would have been remembered even had he not met so dramatic and gruesome a death. For *Sozaboy* is not just an antiwar novel, it is anti-rhetorical and mistrustful of all high-flown sentiment.

Sozaboy is subtitled *A novel in rotten English.* It is the first-person narrative of a young villager who goes to be a "sozaboy" (a soldier boy) during the Nigerian Civil War, written in the kind of English—incorrect, but often highly expressive and even poetic—that semi-educated West Africans use with great gusto and pride.

Saro-Wiwa's novel was not the first to be written in this kind of English. Nearly half a century ago, Amos Tutuola published *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) to critical acclaim, and no one who read it was likely to forget the impact of the first two paragraphs:

> I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life. In those days we did not know other money, except COWRIES, so that everything was very cheap, and my father was the richest man in our town.
>
> My father got eight children and I was the eldest among them, all the rest were hard workers, but I myself was an expert palm-wine drinkard. I was drinking palm-wine from morning till night and from night till morning. By that time I could not drink ordinary water at all except palm-wine.

But whereas Tutuola probably could not write in any other style of English, and his story was a wild surrealist *Pilgrim's Progress* (without, as far as I can tell, any moral content or meaning) of a drunkard through the spirit world of the Nigerian imagination, Saro-Wiwa used his rotten English self-consciously for literary and emotional effect, in a work of strict social realism. And he did it with a consummate mastery that he never quite attained elsewhere in his oeuvre.

In *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa successfully reconciled his desire to write in authentic West African English with his desire to reach a wider English-speaking audience: for after a few conventions are grasped, and with the help of a short glossary (itself very entertaining), *Sozaboy* can be read by any English speaker with ease. Saro-Wiwa also managed to create a thoroughly credible protagonist, a village boy suddenly thrust into a new and alien world, who is naïve, but not stupid, and goodhearted while retaining the normal desires of flesh and blood. Having achieved these two considerable literary feats (writing in authentic but comprehensible West African English, and creating a credible village hero), Saro-Wiwa tells an affecting story through the eyes of his narrator: Mene, a

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young man from Dukana. Our sympathy for him is engaged at once:

> I am free-born of Dukana and that is where I went to school. I am the only son of my mama and I have no father. It is my mama who sent me to St. Dominic's school in Dukana where I passed my elementary six with distinction. In fact, I am very clever boy in school and I like to work hard always.

Unfortunately, his mother is unable to pay for his further education. "The thing pained me bad bad because I wanted to be big man like lawyer or doctor riding car and talking big big English." His mother suggests that he become a mechanic and driver instead:

> So my mama told me that I should learn to be driver. Because Dukana people have one lorry which they call "Progres." But they have no driver and they have to go and get driver from another country to drive the lorry.

Mene describes how the people in Dukana react with joy to the news of a military coup that overthrows the corrupt civilian government:

> Even one woman was talking that the sun will shine proper proper and people will not die again because there will be medicine in the hospital and the doctor will not charge money for operation.

Gradually, however, the deteriorating political situation impinges on Dukana. At first, it is good for business.

> And plenty people were returning to their village. From far far places. We motor people begin to make plenty money. Plenty trouble, plenty money. And my master [the owner of the truck] was prouding. We were charging passengers as lawyer charge people who get case. We were charging them proper.

But soon "fear begin to catch everybody" because stories are heard "about how they are killing people in the train; cutting their hand or their leg or breaking their head with matchet."

> Pastor Barika of Church of Light of God, the most important church in Dukana, was saying the world will soon end. I no like that one at all. How will the world end and I never get my [driving] licence? Is that good thing?

The simplicity and narrowness of Mene's concerns (and those of his fellow villagers) are charmingly conveyed. But the rest of the book is a painful African *Bildungsroman*. As the civil war approaches Dukana, Mene's young wife Agnes and the older men in the village goad Mene into joining the army. It is the way for him to prove his manhood, and the uniform is very smart and attractive besides. So Mene joins up without any idea of what war might actually entail, or even why it is being fought (at no point in the book is the alleged purpose of the war mentioned).

Mene soon learns that there is more to war than parading in a smart uniform to the admiration of his wife. He is sent into action, where his officers behave with casual brutality and his friends are killed by planes "shitting bombs." He suffers hunger, fear, and hardship; eventually he is badly injured and captured by the enemy, who restore him to health and make him join their army. Mene realizes that the two contending armies are in fact identical, offering their soldiers no reason to fight and kill other than hatred of the enemy. But why should they hate the enemy? No reason is given. He meets only skullduggery and treachery.

He manages to desert and returns clandestinely to Dukana, whose population is now either dead or in refugee camps. The village is in ruins. The book ends as Mene walks disconsolately from Dukana:

> And as I was going, I was just thinking how the war have spoiled my town Dukana, uselessed many people, killed others, killed my mama and my wife, Agnes, my beautiful young wife. and now it have made me like

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porson wey [person who] get leprosy because I have no town again.

And I was thinking how I was prouding before to go to soza and call myself *Sozaboy*. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely.

How ironical that a man who wrote these heartfelt words (surely the distillation of his own experience of the Nigerian Civil War) should have started a political movement that resulted in violence and mass displacement. But Saro-Wiwa was in any case thoroughly disillusioned by the inability of mere writing to change anything by itself. His television series, "Basi and Company," had been watched by one Nigerian in three, after all, and yet nothing in Nigeria had changed. Through the character of Basi, a young ne'er-do-well who rents a room from a Lagos landlady called Madam the Madam, and who constantly dreams of dishonest schemes to make a fortune overnight, he had neatly satirized the national mentality. Every Nigerian had recognized himself in Basi, and laughed heartily, and yet had remained unchanged. It was time, Saro-Wiwa said, for more than mere words.

Throughout my last meeting with Saro-Wiwa, I thought of the letter Turgenev wrote on his deathbed to Tolstoy in 1883—the last words, indeed, he ever wrote. At the time Tolstoy had forsaken writing novels for moralistic tracts.

My dear Lev Nikolayevich,

I have not written to you for a long time for I was and still am at death's door. I am writing especially to you to say how glad I was to have been a contemporary of yours and to express my final, sincere request. My friend, return to literature! This gift comes to you from where everything else comes. Ah, how happy I should be to think that this request would have some effect on you. My friend, great writer of the Russian land, heed my request! Let me know if this note reaches you, and allow me to embrace you tightly, tightly, for one last time, and your wife and all your family. I can write no more.

With Saro-Wiwa and I, however, it was the supplicant who survived and the person to whom the appeal was addressed who died. Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged in Port Harcourt prison—at the fifth attempt—on November 10, 1995.

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Willa Cather's "The Professor's House"

by Donald Lyons

For there to be a humanitas *and for this to build up a "world" around itself, a habitable "cosmos" on earth, this classical common sense posited a natural and divine "cosmos" as an original and prior ontological model, independent of all human manipulation.*
—Marc Fumaroli (1999)

Willa Cather's novel *The Professor's House* (1925) is an inquiry into the nature of civilization, of man's impulse to civilize and create. The book holds in majestic and mournful equipoise both the nobility of the civilizing instinct and the certainty of its frustration.

The book is divided into three books of unequal length and kind. The first (and longest, taking up almost two-thirds of the novel), called "The Family," tells of Godfrey St. Peter, aged fifty-two, a history professor at an unnamed college on a Great Lake, a man with a wife and two daughters who has come into some prize money for one of the volumes of his magnum opus, *Spanish Adventurers in North America*. At the insistence of his wife, Lillian, the money has been used to build a new house, but Godfrey is very reluctant to quit the old house, where his daughters grew up and his books were written. The professor had one shining pupil, Tom Outland, a boy who had turned up mysteriously out of the West and had died young in World War I but not before discovering the formula (he was a scientist, not a historian) for a revolutionary automobile gas and leaving in his will the patent to Rosamond St. Peter, the professor's eldest daughter, to whom he was engaged. Rosamond has since married one Louie Marsellus, an extroverted entrepreneur who has realized millions on the patent and is moving with Rosamond into a grand mansion to be called "Outland." The professor is disgusted by this commercialization of his student's work, as is his younger daughter, Kathleen, who had loved Tom and is now married to a sarcastic and relatively impecunious journalist, Scott McGregor. Lillian sides with Louie and has, in spirit, joined the new against the old, as represented by her husband and his beloved old house.

At the end of "The Family," Lillian and the Marselluses have sailed to France for the summer, leaving the professor alone in his house except for the occasional visits of Augusta, a devout German Catholic spinster sewing-woman. Godfrey had been invited to join the trip to Europe, but had fastidiously declined, ostensibly in order to edit and annotate Tom's diary—the account of his doings before coming to the university—for publication. Godfrey finds himself recalling an earlier summer when, with the wife and children off in Colorado, he and Outland dined often together in the garden on "a fine leg of lamb, *saignant*, well rubbed with garlic" (Godfrey is by way of being an epicure). When it rained, they "sat inside and read Lucretius." On one rainy night,

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though, Tom "at last told the story he had kept back. It was nothing very incriminating, nothing very remarkable; a story of youthful defeat, the sort of thing a boy is sensitive about—until he grows older." Tom's story occupies a quarter of the book.

The irruption of this story into the narrative, now rightly seen as a masterstroke, was once decried. Alfred Kazin, for instance, said, in *On Native Grounds*, that "the violence with which she broke the book in half to tell the long and discursive narrative of Tom's boyhood in the Southwest was a technical mistake that has damned the book." Neither long nor discursive nor about his boyhood nor breaking the book in half, the tale told by Tom is a magical piece of writing that attains an ecstatic, a religious intensity very seldom matched in American letters.

First, Cather found a simple but supple voice for Tom, an orphan (his parents perished in a wagon train) first seen working as a "call-boy"—that is, one who summons Santa Fe railroad engineers for early trains—in New Mexico. In "The Family" she used a rich, wry, third-person style virtually identical with the deeply ironic sensibility of the professor, its central consciousness. For "Tom Outland's Story" she adapted, in essence, the voice of Huck Finn, purged of colloquialisms and coarseness, for a narrative that will chronicle the Southwest as Huck sang the Mississippi. Tom befriends the train-fireman Roddy Blake, a fellow loner, who, when Tom gets pneumonia, quits his railroad post and finds them both outdoors jobs with a cattle company in remote southern New Mexico. Blake is a radical obsessed with Dreyfus and the Chicago anarchists, but he makes Tom read the Latin texts prescribed by a local priest, Father Duchene, who has also taken Tom under his wing. Tom reads one-hundred lines of Caesar a day at the urging of Blake, who "had great respect for education, but he believed it was some kind of hocus-pocus that enabled a man to live without work."

Across the Cruzados ("Crusade") River from their camp lies the Blue Mesa, unclimbed and "tantalizing," but forbidden to them by their boss, who thinks of it merely as a temptation to the cattle. But its spell grips the young pair. When Tom says, "It was light up there long before it was with us," he refers only to the trajectory of morning sunrays, but he speaks a deeper truth.

> Some mornings it would loom up above the dark river like a blazing volcanic mountain. . . . No wonder the thing bothered us and tempted us; it was always before us, and was always changing.

When, still on the near side of the Cruzados, Tom unearths some pottery fragments, he sees that

> To people, alone as we were, there is something stirring about finding evidence of human labour and care in the soil of an empty country. It comes to you as a sort of message, makes you feel differently about the ground you walk over every day. I liked the winter range better than any place I'd ever been in.

One day he crosses the river by himself and explores:

> It may have been the hint of snow in the air, but it seemed to me that I had never breathed in anything that tasted as pure as the air in the valley. It made my mouth and nostrils smart like charged water.

As he looks up,

> I wish I could tell what I saw there, just *as* I saw it . . . a little city of stone, asleep. It was as still as sculpture. . . . It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition.

Tom has instinctive recourse to the beauty and rational order of art in articulating the city. In its midst is a tower,

> beautifully proportioned—the fine thing that held all the jumble of the houses together and made them mean something. . . . I knew at

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> once that I had come upon the city of some extinct civilization, hidden away in this inaccessible mesa for centuries, preserved in the dry air and almost perpetual sunlight like a fly in amber, guarded by the cliffs and the river and the desert.

After hesitating, Tom tells Roddy about the place, and the next May (a year after arriving in the region) the two cross over and begin a proper investigation, assisted occasionally by a savvy old drunken cook and by the visiting Father Duchene. The work of cataloguing and interpreting begins in earnest. "The really splendid thing about our city, the thing that made it delightful to work there, was the setting." But that the city had been no utopia is made clear by the discovery of a female skeleton, murdered and retaining on her face "a look of terrible agony." Duchene speculates that she was caught in adultery. And the supremely haunting question arises: "What had become of them? What catastrophe had overwhelmed them?"

Duchene, wise in Indian lore, explains the *logos* of the place to the young explorers. The central tower, he thinks, was an astronomical observatory; smaller towers were granaries; the semicircular ridge atop the mesa was an amphitheater "where probably religious exercises and games took place." He thinks the citizens were "a superior people . . . a provident, rather thoughtful people," perhaps too civilized for their place and time.

> "I feel [Duchene says] a reverence for this place. Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself up out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot. Your people were cut off here without the natural influence of example or emulation, with no incentive but some natural yearning for order and security. They built themselves into this mesa and humanized it."

Their fate? "They were probably wiped out, utterly exterminated, by some roving Indian tribe without culture or domestic virtues." The race's urge for order, meaning, and beauty is no guarantee of permanence.

Duchene gives Tom the well-meant but fatal advice to go to the Smithsonian and fetch a real archaeologist to interpret and "revive" this civilization. Thus Tom arrives (in what must have been the early years of the century) in Washington. In this poetic allegory of a book, the American capital is presented systematically and deliberately as a thorough contrast to Cliff City. It is a place in thrall to pride, greed, selfishness, and inhumanity. At first, to be sure, Tom experiences "a religious feeling"; the first structures he sees are "the Treasury building, and the War and Navy"—money and might instead of science and nutrition. He wanders about sightseeing and "for that week I was wonderfully happy." He then enters the bureaucracy, where he is snubbed or ignored by the Indian commissioner and the Smithsonian director—vain and cruel poseurs interested only in free lunches and junkets to Europe, supremely uninterested in the mesa. The sole warm people Tom meets are a secretary ("a nice little Virginia girl") and a young lieutenant attached to the French Embassy; both are poor and powerless. Tom rooms with a young couple; the husband is a low-level bureaucrat typical of the city's thousands of "people in slavery, who ought to be free." On leaving, he says, "I remember the city chiefly by those beautiful sad sunsets, white columns and green shrubbery [at the White House], and the [Washington] Monument shaft still pink while the stars were coming out." Nature is in melancholy disharmony with the man-made world here, not at one with it as on the mesa. It is a devastating sketch of a city populated by knaves and slaves, a site as spiritually empty as the mesa is spiritually alive.

Tom's absence from the mesa on the D.C. trip ("I wanted nothing but to get back to the mesa and live a free life and breathe free air") has been the occasion for a well-meaning but wounding act by Roddy. Knowing Tom was getting nowhere in the

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capital, Roddy sold the mesa's artifacts to a German dealer for $4000 to finance Tom's college education. Enraged, Tom turns on Roddy: "They weren't mine to sell—not yours! They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from." Tom berates the uncomprehending Roddy, who had acted out of love and who leaves in a mood of bitter shame. Tom stays on alone, at "home":

> Once again I had that glorious feeling of being *on the mesa*, in a world above the world. And the air, my God, what air!—Soft, tingling, gold, hot with an edge of chill on it, full of the smell of pinons—it was like breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky.

This language, broken in syntax, panting in synaesthetic joy, is both physical and mystical, a holy absorption in a place at once God-made and man-made. As he admits, "For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion." Feeling "filial piety" and "happiness unalloyed," he drinks in the place, seeing it "for the first time . . . as a whole. It all came together in my understanding. . . . I can scarcely hope that life will give me another summer like that one. It was my high tide. I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way." Tom's intensest apperception of the mesa—and, analogously, man's perception of all art, of all cultivated life—is not possession but understanding. He comes in that summer to transcendentalize his *seeing* of the mesa; his *logos* is at one with its development. Alas, this insight has come too late to save his friendship with Roddy.

Tom also, that summer, reads the entire *Aeneid*. Cather knew Roman literature intimately, in her blood, and used it tellingly in her tales. In the pioneer story *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden reads Virgil's *Georgics*, about the taming of a land; in *A Lost Lady*, about an amorous woman, Niel Herbert reads Ovid's *Heroides*, stories of smitten mythic heroines. Here, Tom has at first read Caesar's bellicose narratives, before experiencing the mesa; on the mesa, he reads Virgil's tragic epic chronicle of the necessity and the pain of civilizing empire. "Sunt lacrimae rerum" might be the motto of both works. On the day he meets the professor and is asked to recite some Virgil, Tom chooses one of the epic's grimmest moments, the destruction of Troy, yet another city wiped out by a "brutal" race. Tom and the professor go on to read Lucretius—the Epicurean who counselled exemption from emotion (and, perhaps, striving). The Blue Mesa, the District of Columbia, Troy, the Roman Empire, the Spanish adventurers in North America—all are paradigms of human striving, at once glorious and pathetic. How bracing for us today, beset with simplistic puerilities about American and European civilization, is the adult and comprehensive wisdom of Cather, who, while never idealizing, keeps before our eyes the human achievement—and its religious dimension. Godfrey may be an aesthete and agnostic who simply collapses the good into the beautiful, but Cather is not. She is a soul as naturally pious as Tom and the mesa people.

Tom does try, through railroad men and newspaper ads, to find Roddy, but Roddy has become the forever lost friend of epic tradition (Patroclus, Euryalus). And the final words of Tom's story are about Roddy: "The older I get, the more I understand what it was I did that night on the mesa. Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it." He acknowledges his sin—not to have seen into Roddy's heart and valued his love more than pots—and he anticipates his own early death in the war that will do to Europe what the anonymous barbarians did to the citizens of the Blue Mesa.

The final part of the novel, called "The Professor," consists largely of a meditation by Godfrey on the shape of his life and the imminence of death. How much of life, he wearily concludes, is chance: his education in France; his comfortable marriage; the ar-

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rival in his life, bringing "a kind of second youth," of Tom, who took Godfrey down to the southwest and the Blue Mesa and thus made the last four volumes of "Spanish Adventurers" better because more steeped in the "great dazzling South-west country"—a country so beloved and so often sung by Cather herself. Godfrey comes to see Tom's death as beneficent, as having spared him the inevitable corruptions of money, marriage, career, politics, age.

Forgetting Tom, Godfrey begins "a new friendship," one with his own boyhood self, a Huck Finnish "primitive . . . only interested in earth and woods and water." But Godfrey has the presence of mind to perceive that finding one's essential self in some unsocialized, presexual, eternal boy amounts to a desire for death; he decides to see a doctor. It is important to note that Cather, too, diagnoses Godfrey's condition as pathological. The doctor finding nothing wrong, Godfrey decides to recover and admits he may indeed be alive next summer. Where to go, then? Paris? Too reminiscent of his youth. Rather go to "Outland's country . . . those long, rugged untamed vistas dear to the American heart." He realizes, too, that he can no longer live with his "intense and positive" wife; he must stay in the old house, in the attic of which he almost dies one night when the gas stove flame goes out. Suicide attempt? No, for he half-tries to fix the stove before collapsing. In any case, he is fortuitously saved by Augusta, "a corrective, a remedial influence, the bloomless side of life that he always ran away from." Sound and simple, Augusta is the type of ordinary humanity (not so simple as all that, though, when she—correctly—assures a skeptical and amused Godfrey that "the Blessed Virgin composed the Magnificat"). Her woeful goodness teaches the learned aesthete to endure life "without delight . . . just as, in a Prohibition country, he would have to learn to live without sherry."

The novel ends not in a self-pitying or complacent slide into death, but in the conversion of an epicurean into a stoic. It's a conversion behind which we feel the author's full weight. "Life is possible, may even be pleasant, without joy, with passionate griefs," Godfrey decides. He loves Lucretius, but the America of 1925 calls for a Seneca, if not for a Senecan suicide. Suicide, opines Godfrey, is "a grave social misdemeanor—except when it occurred in very evil times, as a form of protest." But Calvin Coolidge was not yet Nero.

We have, however, seen much evidence in "The Family" that they were, if not very evil, at least sordid times. The university has lowered its standards to such an extent that a popular professor (a rival of Godfrey's and nephew of an influential politician) lets his students read novels for credit in American history courses. (One feels, sensing Cather's horror at this, that she is closer to Virgil than to poor us.) The idea of a university is a "lost cause" not just intellectually but physically. "The architect had had," reflects Godfrey, "a good idea, something like the old Smithsonian building in Washington"—an institution, as Godfrey will hear, corrupt within. "But after it was begun, the State Legislature had defeated him by grinding down the contractor to cheap execution, and had spoiled everything outside and in." Another antitype to the mesa.

Godfrey's beloved daughter, Kathleen, is eaten up with envy of her nasty and mercenary sister Rosamond. His sons-in-law are bitter (Scott) or coarse (Louie). Louie Marsellus finally wins over both Godfrey and us by the cheerful, generous innocence of his materialism; he has been not unfairly described (by Hermione Lee in her intelligent book on Cather) as a case of Cather's writing herself out of her temptation to a mild anti-Semitism. (It is Marsellus's singularity as Jew in the novel that is unfortunate, a condition that could have been erased by the inclusion of, say, an ascetic Jewish professorial colleague of Godfrey's.)

Just as Louie's flamboyant displays are mitigated by a kind heart, so too Lillian's chilly distance from Godfrey and rapt absorption in Louie's concerns are softened by

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a night at the opera. She and Godfrey, in Chicago at a posh hotel paid for by Louie, are treated by him to opera tickets. Thomas's *Mignon* (with its "immortal song" of longing for a country of eternal spring) is on, and it reminds the old married pair of their courtship in Paris.

> "My dear," he sighed when the lights were turned on and they both looked older, "it's been a mistake, our having a family and writing histories and getting middle-aged."

His wife agrees, but adds,

> "One must go on living, Godfrey. But it wasn't the children who came between us." There was something lonely and forgiving in her voice, something that spoke of an old wound, healed and hardened and hopeless.

In that last sentence Cather at the same time gives and Indian-gives to Lillian, who is "forgiving" but also "hardened" in relation to her "old wound"—which might be either the arrival of Tom in their lives or, more generally, Godfrey's solipsistic withdrawal from the family. "The heart of another," realizes Godfrey, "is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own."

Paris—as remembered by Godfrey—is another, if more private, archetype of the city as beautiful, lovable place, another antitype of Washington and Chicago. But Godfrey's Paris is a prewar dream: "The sky was of such an intense silvery grey that all the grey stone buildings along the Rue St. Jacques and the Rue Sufflot came out in that silver shine stronger than in sunlight." In this book, Paris is memory, an aroma; *One of Ours* (1922) had been Cather's fullest tribute to France, seen as, despite the war, a liberating experience for her midwestern soldier hero. And, of course, Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) was soon to fashion a postwar Paris of alluring, rootless, and irresponsible magic.

It is late in "The Family" when Scott remarks to the professor that "You know, Tom isn't very real to me anymore. Sometimes I think he was just a—a glittering idea." The thought troubles Godfrey and sets him to recalling "as clearly and definitely as he could every incident of that bright, windy spring day when he first saw Tom." Like a god in disguise, the sunbaked youth recited Virgil and casually bestowed upon the little girls two turquoises from the mesa; little Kathleen at once mythicized Tom and Roddy, and she still recalls "my romantic dream, when I was little, of finding Roddy . . . and bring[ing] him back to Tom. You know Tom told us about him before he ever told you." But finally, Tom has become for the professor, too, merely "some fugitive idea."

The book's first and third framing sections cover, in fact, an academic year, from September to September. The framed section, beginning in fall and ending in spring, takes up about a year and a half in Tom's life. Cather's exact seasonal placement of the stories in the lives of her two heroes is one index of her meticulous imagining; her feel for, and ability to summon up, time and place is legendary. It in fact becomes the central achievement of her later, episodic novels *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931).

In *The Professor's House* that gift works in harmony with considerations of narrative and character. The book, though, is not a traditional but a modernist novel, for Cather leaves out so much and leaves so much for us to do by the mere juxtaposition of thematic segments. Its modernist architecture is matched by its polyphonic variety of narrative voices. Its appearance in the *annus mirabilis* of 1925 prompts a comparative look at F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, also published in that year. (Fitzgerald's book owed something to Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) in the first place.) Fitzgerald is, through the figure of Gatsby, nee James Gatz, conducting an investigation of what has become of American civilization in the postwar years. If Tom Outland, always somewhat idealized and a

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rather improbable inventor, becomes posthumously a mere idea, Gatsby springs from "his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about his father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." Gatsby, that is, enacts in his person the declension from pure idea into base matter that, in Cather, is left to Outland's heirs and survivors. But the prior ideal America that has become Gatsby's Long Island is very exiguously evoked by Fitzgerald; we have that famous final vision of the Dutch sailors' eyes finding in the "fresh, green breast of the new world . . . something commensurate to their capacity for wonder." Compared to the mesa, this is a wisp of smoke. Nick Carraway, the narrator and onlooker whose voice is the great success of the book, says, "I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life." This theme of the West remains a tantalizing hint in *Gatsby*, the strength of which lies in its creation of a decadent East designed to seem simultaneously sordid and magical.

The third great fictional inquisition into America published in 1925 was Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, a novel that proceeds not by contrasting a fallen America with a paradisal past but by presenting in massive specificity an illustrative parable-cum-specimen-case from (roughly) the present. If Cather wanted to "unfurnish" the novel and Fitzgerald too, at least in *Gatsby*, sought a modernist slimness and symbolism, Dreiser clung to an unshorn fullness of detail.

The vast tragedy of the war and the raw energy of the boom seem to have charged America's writers with power, and the Twenties became the old century's greatest decade in fiction and in poetry. The last great American novel of the Twenties, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), differed in two key ways from those great books of 1925: far from offering a meditation on a country fallen from grace, it grubbed deep in the soil of a part of the country that had never harbored any illusions of America's Platonic perfectibility and had always smelled of sin (it could be argued that his second great novel, *Absalom, Absalom* [1936], did attempt an anatomy of the American Fall). Secondly, Faulkner deployed a dazzling array of presentational techniques, a panoply clearly inspired by the great work of European prose modernism, Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

The influence of *The Professor's House* can be glimpsed in Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth* (1929), a book in which the eponymous hero grows from industrialist into cultivated European epicurean, in the process shedding a coarsely sensual wife. Lewis, a writer Cather liked, is not at his best in *Dodsworth* (his best book is probably *Arrowsmith*, a 1925 portrait of an idealistic doctor), a book that tries to unite the soul of Cather, the themes of Wharton, and the brashness of newspapers. Wharton herself produced in the 1920s work by no means negligible: the retrospective *Age of Innocence* (1920) is one of her finest books, while stories like *Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) and *Twilight Sleep* (1927) are amused inquiries into contemporary life. But Wharton was *not* of the Twenties; her great work had been done before the war, the war that arguably killed her master, Henry James. And without *The Professor's House*, Virginia Woolf would not have written *To The Lighthouse* (1929) in just the way she did as a fairly straightforward tale of family and art; Cather proved for her much more assimilable fare than Joyce, on which (she would have denied it, of course) *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is grotesquely dependent.

The Professor's House, then, combining as it does a profound study of individual consciousness with a tragic meditation on the nature of (especially American) civilization, deserves to be seen as one of the greatest and most relevant of the novels of the old century.

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A great, baggy monster: Rilke's "Duino Elegies"

by John Simon

The long poem, if we rightly exclude the dramatic, comes in three varieties: narrative, including epic; philosophical, including existential; and metaphysical, including religious. And, of course, in any combination of the above. When we, here and now, think "long poem," we usually mean Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, maybe Blake, and probably Yeats and Eliot. What is perspicuous is how much most of these depend on plot: how many nonacademics push beyond the *Inferno* or plod on to *Paradise Regained*?

Yet the plot is not a basic constituent of the poetic, except perhaps as a hurdle. Prose can do its job, with some minor losses, much better. Homer resorted to verse as a mnemonic device in a largely preliterate age. Others followed because it was the tradition, and because the novel in prose had not yet caught on. Once it did, it was goodbye, epic poetry. As a nonheroic narrative, the long poem is even more cumbersome: think of those shipwrecked Robinsons, Edwin Arlington and Jeffers, whom no one now thinks of rescuing.

The philosophical poem, too, is easily outdone by prose; even Lucretius reads nicely in a good prose translation, and can you imagine anything worse than Heidegger in verse? The same for metaphysics. The great religious or quasi-religious poems—think Donne, Herbert, or Hopkins; Verlaine, Claudel, or Francis Jammes; Matthias Claudius, Hölderlin, or Novalis—are short. The lyrical impulse refuses to be stretched thin. So it seems that Poe was right; there are no long poems. I for one have always preferred Eliot before he started playing quartets, and there are any number of Rilke's poems I'll take over *The Duino Elegies*, near-universally acclaimed as the poet's magnum opus.

Yet now, all at once, we have three new translations of *The Duino Elegies*: in a separate volume, as part of a selected works, or as the crowning conclusion to what concerns me here, William H. Gass's *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*, which deals with a lot of things, but gravitates toward the *Elegies*.[1] There have been many English translations of this work of roughly thirty pages and in ten parts, but people still keep trying; poetry is hard to translate, and this late work of Rilke's especially so.

To what extent that work has preoccupied the poetry world can be learned from the three-volume study of it, the so-called *Materialien*, a kind of anthology edited by Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel, to which I will abundantly but tacitly refer. It reprints or excerpts just about everything conceivable up to 1964—and not only in German—in three volumes of three- to four-hundred pages each (inception, variants, publishing history, letters, utterances,

1 *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*, by William Gass; Alfred A. Knopf, 256 pages, $25.

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reviews, interpretations, evaluations, re-evaluations, and bibliography—a trilogy of which Gass seems to be unaware.

More damaging is his not taking into account Rilke's *Testament*, first published in 1974. Rilke had been struggling with the unfinished *Elegies* for ten years, and put together this slender, handwritten volume in 1920, as he abandoned hope of termination. It was intended for his then major mistress (Rilke had a handful of major, and a legion of minor, ones), the painter Elisabeth Dorothee (Spiro) Klossowska, mother of the painter Balthus, and known as Mouky to her friends, Merline to Rilke, and Baladine to herself. She was, it seems, the chief inspirer of the *Elegies*, and the thirty-page *plaquette* was made up of poem fragments and unfinished letters to the beloved.

Of course, it was also a self-justification, eventually, to the world for Rilke's inability to finish the great work, the unchivalrous reason being proffered that loving deflects too much from working on one's poetry, the poet's ultimate purpose in life. This theme runs through much of Rilke's work, and Gass is, obviously, not unaware of it. Yet the poet never sums up this predicament as tersely as Pierre Costals, the novelist-hero of Montherlant's *Les Jeunes Filles*, in the passage about the two faucets, work and life, between whose respective turnings on and off the writer uneasily fluctuates.

Reading Rilke elicits from me an intense love-hate: it is often dazzling and, almost as often, infuriating. The book is, first, a concise psychobiography of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), and offers a fine sense of this complex, devious, vain, mock-humble, surpassingly sensitive, and frequently insensitive man. We get the biographical data not in chronological order, but subsumed by a free-floating meditation on Rilke's work, of which this is a compelling critical study. Gass mixes biography and criticism, specific analyses and speculative generalizations, with considerable dexterity.

But this is also an essay on the problems of translation, of Rilke's poems and poetry in general, not lacking in astute observations. Two of them I find most interesting: that translations need not make a poem sound as if it were written yesterday, and that "one is generally wise to render the poem as the poet wrote it, and let the poet's poem explain itself." Unfortunately, Gass the translator often ignores Gass the critic's wise precepts. For yes, *Reading Rilke* is also a selection from Rilke's poetry translated by Gass, sometimes reproducing Rilke's rhyme scheme, sometimes more freely. Gass has some genuine successes here, as well as resounding failures.

The book is, further, a kind of omnium gatherum, with many an excursus on what fascinates Gass, such as a lengthy parallel between the modus operandi of Rilke with that of the mathematician Henri Poincaré, which does little for me. These digressions can be highly stimulating as well as annoyingly self-indulgent. More disturbingly, Gass yields at times to the urge to equal Rilke's poetry with Gassian, not to say gassy, prose. Most valuable, however, are extended line-by-line comparisons of numerous English translations of the *Elegies*, with usually judicious assessments of their achievements and shortfalls, incidentally providing a close reading of the text, with many a welcome insight for readers who have no German. Alas, Gass's own translations of these passages, sometimes even in several versions, often fall below those of previous translators. The culmination of *Reading Rilke* is Gass's complete Englishing of the *Elegies*, imperfect and not even quite honest: it fails to provide the original on facing pages (or anywhere else), making it much harder to detect the translator's traducings. But at least Gass does not attempt to boil down the *Elegies* to some limp formula: the traducer is not a reducer.

Let me proceed to some of my observations while reading *Reading Rilke*. Gass nicely evokes the bad luck and unhappiness that dogged the marriage of Rilke's parents, and Rilke's mother dressing the boy as a girl (a not all that uncommon practice then—think Wilde), with the possible bad effect

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this had on the grown man. But promptly Gass becomes *outré* describing the household: "Kid, Kitchen, Kirk, Koffee in which to dip a Kookie: they add up to Komfort." This is soon redressed by an elegant trope: "Contradiction paves every avenue of feeling, and we grow up in bewilderment like a bird in a ballroom, with all that space and none meant for flying, a wide shining floor and nowhere to light [sic for *alight*]." Nicely put, as is this about Rilke's involvement with the formidable Lou Andreas Salome, as formative as it was unsettling: "Meeting your match may make for a doubled flame, but it will certainly result, quite soon, in two burnt ends." In this case, it was only René Maria Rilke, who at Lou's urging became Rainer Maria, who got burned.

Gass aptly evokes Rilke,

> the lover and letter writer, a man drawn to women like a bee who, heavy with their honey, soon returns to his hive; or one might remark Rilke's career as a social climber, as the accomplished cultivator of those who may prove of some assistance to Art—occasionally artists, critics, editors, and poets, but generally people of wealth, position, and comfortable estates; or take note of the "inspired one," who is attacked by the Muse from time to time the way storms lash rocky coasts . . . with sudden stiff onslaughts of both poetry and prose . . . Rilke is the traveler who passes through places the way others pass their years.

This is often censured in Rilke: his pretensions to nobility and his playing up to aristocratic ladies and, more rarely, gentlemen, who could provide him with the odd palazzo, castle, or tower—and requisite servants—in which to live in heroic isolation in the fawning company of women falling on their faces (or, too often, over backward) before such incomparable sensitivity and insight. Irritating is not so much the parasitism of all this as its influence on the work, which doubtless found being wistful, ethereal, and unremittingly elevated conducive to steady patronage. Rilke had to sing and swing high for his supper, "a professional melancholic and castle-dweller" as that fine poet Wilhelm Lehmann called him. Or, as Gass drolly puts it, Rilke "had realms" in which he "dwelt."

Even better is this:

> The course of life was . . . marked and marred by weakness, by giving in, by disappointment, as he ate, loved, schemed for advancement, groveled for money or employment, worried about a roof over his head, while trying to keep that head in the good clouds where it belonged.

And again: "Rilke liked to display his allegiance to the simple life by eating greens and taking barefoot walks." Many passages evoke Rilke's existential shenanigans with wry humor—but also often with show-offy, cluttered imagery. Particularly effective are the descriptions of Rilke as Rodin's amanuensis, and of the dying poet "refusing narcotics in order to keep a clear head, the better to confront his illness."

Sadly, though, Gass mistranslates part of one of Hölderlin's finest poems: "With yellow pears hangs/ And full with wild roses/ The land in the lake." This should be "into the lake." The poem is "Hälfte des Lebens" ("Half [or mid-point] of Life"), where what was hangs toward the lake and is reflected by what is to come: the same, only in reverse—a great, tragic image for what the future holds. With "*in* the lake," which bypasses the confluence of inverse doubles, all is lost. No less annoying are hyperkinetic Gassian tropes such as "The sonnet shape is as powerful as a right-wing religious group . . . conservative to the core, and snooty to boot," by way of discussing the difficulties of translating formal verse. But need there be such mistakes as when Gass translates "und ohne Füsse kann ich zu dir gehn" as "walk without feet to where you were," which flubs the needed point of "where you *are*," to say nothing of producing the jingle *where-were*.

Next comes the book's invaluable part: the minute, line-by-line comparison of sel-

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ected passages from the *Elegies* as rendered by a dozen or more translators, with sound assessments of what they got right or wrong. The only trouble is that, as noted, we get Gass's own versions, quite often as faulty as any, sometimes even in bad English, e.g., "that completer existence."

Gass's interpretation of the much-debated Rilkean Angels is as good as any:

> The Angels are what the poet would be if he could free himself from human distraction, if he could be indifferent to the point of divinity, absorbed in himself like [sic] all noumena are, and at one with the work and the world of the work, its radiant perfections.

If the sentence stopped here, all would be well, but our author seldom leaves well enough alone, and embellishes with trifling tropes and mannered minutiae—smidgens in the Gass, alas—so the sentence staggers on: "like those twice luminous worms which [preferably *that*] glow with the added glory of their own phosphorescence: the lower light flouncing outward like a shout —that rare instreaming Rilkean light— swirling toward its source like water softly down a drain."

Gass's version of "Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich," "Every Angel is awesome," is awful. We read: "'Awesome' is also a word being given the teenage treatment, but I think it's still possible to say 'awesome' and not mean the noise from an electrolouded band." Think again, Gass; *awesome* is as co-opted as *gay*. But he is right to remark, "Many translations do not bother to understand their texts. That would interfere with their own creativity and with their perception of what the poet ought to have said." An admirable caveat, regrettably overlooked by Gass the translator. Before you buy this book, check out Gass at his most verbose on pages 70–71. If that is too much for you, as it almost is for me, you had better desist.

Gass, indeed, can be pretty opaque, as when he glosses "ich . . . verschlucke den Lockruf dunkelen Schluchzens" with "the cry is held back because the fear itself is a fear we worship out of frightened gratitude," which I defy an Angel to explicate. Although he is funny about the failings of other translators ("As we advanced into the elegy as into some movie Africa, the weaknesses of our company became increasingly manifest: the heat is getting to them, the rotten gin, the drums, the flies"), he is not funny when he allows himself five shots at translating one short passage: that is translating with a spray gun, and even so he manages to miss the target.

Gass is often overfancy, as when he imputes to the German *gelösten* (loosened) "its twin suggestions of 'listen' and 'loosen,'" the first of which is utter nonsense. His writing can also be slatternly: "Language of incredible musicality." But Gass is again provocative in his disquisition of what a translator must preserve at all costs, and what he can sacrifice if he must, something different for every poet. In Rilke, he says,

> the poetry of idea must come first, the metaphors he makes out of the very edge and absence of meaning, the intense metaphysical quality of his vision . . . while [sic] tone and overall effect would be next.

Well, yes, if you have those, you have just about everything, but Gass himself usually fails on both counts.

He correctly asserts of the *Elegies* that "Their Being was to be beyond the poem," but is that a virtue? I think it's better for the essence to remain inside the poem. Again, Gass goes cryptic: "Rilke's *Elegies* will end when happiness falls." What? "Mouth them . . . for these poems are the most oral I know . . . they must be spoken—not merely by but for yourself." This strikes me as pure cant, and it continues, "the voice-making quality of these lines goes beyond their music. They are an utterance." Of what good poetry could you not say all the above? Beyond the poem, beyond the music—this surely is metacriticism.

But Gass is good at conjuring up Rilke's frustration from writer's block, and cogently lists all the things bothering the poet, in-

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cluding "those migraines that troubled one end of him and the hemorrhoids that pained the other." Yet he has to spoil it:

> Rilke was as restless as one who hoped to leave his pain in the parlor when he enters the dining room, and his worries in the bedroom when he comes down for breakfast, only to find them spread over his toast and clouding every view.

That metaphor is not just mixed; it's as scrambled as the eggs that go with the worry-buttered toast.

Eloquence possesses Gass on the subject of the death of young women, which so excited Rilke, as it did Poe. Gass writes:

> Certainly such a death . . . had obsessed Rilke during nearly his entire life. Not only did it seem that a girl had to die to make room for him [a reference to his parents' first child, dead in infancy], but it also seemed that this sad prematurity preserved the child's possibilities along with her innocence.

Furthermore,

> lovers who loved and lost but who continued more devotedly to love, like Gaspara Stampa . . . were his sort of saint [sic]. . . . Rilke's jilted ladies (and all were left in some sort of lurch) ought to love him the more for his resistance. And they did.

Gass gives all kinds of reasons, but neither he nor anyone else to my knowledge, has raised the possibility of some sort of Rilkean sadism. Thus the reveling in the death of the young women, thus the jiltings, thus one very curious passage in *Malte Laurids Brigge*, which this is not the place to examine.

Sloppy syntax again: "Laws . . . exist in the realm of number, where the pioneer, like a verdant valley, finds them." This passage is about mathematics, but even mathematical pioneers tend not to resemble verdant valleys. We get a very unconvincing passage trying to explain why Rilke was unable to finish the *Elegies* during their first onrush at Duino in 1912, and why completion had to wait until 1922 at Muzot. Another terrible Gass trope concerns the breakup of Rilke's marriage, which the poet claimed to have "reached a higher plane." "Actually," Gass goes on, "the couple's plane had crashed, and they were scattered about like baggage on incongenial ground." We have here, all at once, a poor pun, a nonexistent word (for *uncongenial*), and a ghastly simile. This from the jacket copy's "admired essayist, novelist, and philosopher"?

Gass is good at communicating Rilke's betrayal of his friend, the fine painter and human being Paula Modersohn-Becker, to whose tragic death he indirectly contributed. In that way, however, he could produce what he was so good at: a moving requiem on the death of a youngish woman. Gass quotes an affecting entry from Paula's diary that is almost as poetic, and certainly more humane, than most of Rilke's prose. He notes that the "Requiem for a Friend," one of Rilke's best poems, begins "I've had my dead, and I let them go, and was surprised to see them so consoled, so soon at home in being dead."

This brings up death as a main theme of the *Elegies*, as well as in much of Rilke's other work. The poet renounced Christianity, and stipulated that there be no priest at his deathbed. But, as Gass correctly observes, there are more saints, Christs, and Virgin Marys in Rilke's poetry than you could squeeze into a major cathedral. And, of course, Angels. To me, this smells both of fear of death and of hedging your bets. Rilke's chief way of dealing with that fear was to incorporate the dead as variously participating in life. About the above quotation, Gass wryly comments, "The *Elegies* will argue otherwise, deciding that 'it's difficult to be dead.'"

It seems to me allowable for the dead to have as conflicting feelings about death as the living have about life. But only if you assume that the dead have any feelings at all, which looks to me like cheating in the

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poet's fundamentally nonreligious scheme of things. Yet there are more participatory stiffs in Rilke's poetry than there are in ghost stories and horror movies. I find them even more inappropriate than the Angels —always, of course, with a capital *A*, although in German all nouns are capitalized. The meaning and existence of Angels can be argued about; the dead are palpably just plain dead.

It would be different if this afterlife of the dead were conceived figuratively, as some kind of symbol. But no, these dead are all over the place, disporting themselves more energetically than many of the quick. Which can ultimately have only one explanation: the attempt to allay *timor mortis* by denying rigor mortis. This strikes me as more bizarre than another debatable Rilkean trait, frequent in the *Elegies* and elsewhere: interpreting the feelings of animals in anthropomorphic terms, while also stressing the animals' differentness from, indeed superiority to, human beings.

There is, then, overassertiveness to combat doubt. Or, as Gass aptly puts it, "Whenever a poem of Rilke's seems to admonish the reader, openly with 'You must change your life,' or tacitly, through the poem's example, we can be certain that Rilke has failed the charge," just as he failed Paula Modersohn-Becker by not supporting her well-earned disinclination to rejoin her unworthy husband, with fatal consequences for her—a death unjustified by whatever great poetry it occasioned.

On the other important subject in the *Elegies*, love, Gass has this curious statement: "We kiss with our eyes closed because there isn't much to see. And if there were, we wouldn't want to see it." Are there no better explanations for this by no means universal phenomenon, such as Rilke's relentlessly advocated need for interiorization?

Yet there is redemption in Gass's excellent disquisition—no mere digression—on the *objet trouvé* as art, specifically on the urinal (*Fontaine*) of Marcel Duchamp—alas, misspelled as "Duchamps" throughout, copy editors being even more extinct than the dodo. Gass then proceeds to dispute Rilke about animals being more instinctively at one with the world than we are, although Gass's arguments based on animals' alertness to danger signals or becoming habituated to human beings surely cut both ways.

On the subject of Rilke's beloved *Weltinnenraum*, clumsily translated as "innerworldspace," Gass is reasonable when he explains that the invisible signal emitted by objects lands "in an inner space, not the space between our ears, but the space between where our ears hear." The Ninth Elegy asks, "What, if not this deep translation, is your ardent aim?," whereupon Gass makes two of his best observations. First,

> Contemplation was possible for Rilke—but it was more likely to occur in front of a Cézanne. Most of the revolutionary "new" poems [i.e., *Neue Gedichte*], supposed to demonstrate this saintly openness to objects, are about animals in zoos and flower beds in parks, photographs in books, works of art in the shelter of their museums, figures in myth, icons of the church.

In other words, second-hand contemplation. And good, too, Gass's telling conclusion: "I feel obliged to say, when we perceive fully, we do ourselves a favor, not the world." So all this gathering of messages from animals and objects is really a matter of, however enlightened, self-interest, and not the selfless fulfillment of a sacred obligation.

While expatiating on the Rilkean doctrine that, by using them, time inscribes on things and people their history, Gass again lapses into cuteness: "Rust destroys, but it creates character more surely than most playwrights. Aging delights in lines," with a desperate pun on *lines*. And further: "For Rilke, the world has an expressive surface, and its 'look' should not be ignored." True enough, but of how many scrupulous writers is this not equally true? Then, more pirouettes: "According to the *Elegies*, we are

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here just to utter. To sew concept to referent like a button on a coat . . . a button meant not to button but to be." Well, if that isn't cute as a button!

Gass does, however, get at what makes many impatient with Rilke, his

> emphasis on Being rather than Doing, on relinquishment rather than retention, on acceptance rather than on revision; it smacks more of moral indolence than saintliness to them; and its radical subjectivity is offensively antisocial and indifferent to the collective.

This view was splendidly expressed in 1946 by Franz Blei in a generally favorable appraisal, wherein, however, he remarked cannily, that "the ship Rilke steers by a compass that points toward the iron of the ship," and, perhaps more disputably, that "there is not a single true love poem by Rilke—so lonely in the soul was he." Lonely or self-absorbed? The critic Friedrich Sieburg noted in 1949 that "an immeasurable religious need has seized people—with the greatest ineptitude for religiosity. In this tension, the message of . . . *The Duino Elegies* ensconces itself."

In 1975, the distinguished journalist-critic Joachim Kaiser wrote that "it is not only from the all-too-sifted words of this most carefully selective poet that the impression of a taste-monger derives. Alienating was and is the thoughtless deliberateness of his God-fixation, his tendency toward the aristocratic, his lyrical-prophetic *Gefunden-Haben*," which sounds terrible when Englished as "having-foundness." In 1979, the essayist-biographer Peter Wapnewski spoke aptly of Rilke's "mythical code devised for him who contrived it."

Now, it is equally true that, as early as 1926, the good lyric poet Peter Gan praised Rilke's "arduously wrested, incomparable ability to voice finenesses, uniquenesses, nuances of feelings and thoughts that hitherto were lost in the ocean of the ineffable," a perception echoed in 1975 by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Germany's leading critic, as Rilke's "triumph in the struggle with the unsayable." Something similar was expressed even better back in 1925 by the eminent poet-critic Oskar Loerke, for whom Rilke "increased with all his words the treasure of silence." Loerke also averred that philosophy could express itself better through associations than through ratiocination, which quickly exhausts itself.

Contrariwise, in 1929, Baron Börries von Münchhausen, Germany's most popular poet and specialist in ballads (and yes, of the same clan as the Great Liar), though variously appreciative of Rilke, berated him for his rather close imitation of late Hölderlin, for his "substantivitis, a festering of the living verb into the desiccated noun," and for the *Elegies* being, as Rilke himself states at their outset, a self-portrait, far removed from the concerns of the common man. Wilhelm Lehmann took Rilke to task in 1966 for "not taking sensory phenomena very seriously," and seeing them "with a preconception about whether a way from them led 'inward.'" Thus Lehmann: "So he opined that the fig tree bore fruit without first having to bloom, and promptly became a symbol. His work was full of speculativeness, of which the lyric sicklies." Reading Rilke compelled Lehmann "to defend things against this interiorization: trees are so fulfilled in their creatureliness that apprehending them requires none of this heavily talked-about 'innerworldspace.'"

The most succinct screed against the *Elegies* comes from a letter by the distinguished poet and prose writer Albrecht Schaeffer in 1924, who read them

> almost with a shudder. This now is the most hapless blather; an endless, dulcet rustling of the rarest words and phrases, all of them babbling away as sweetly as children's questioning. For this pious, this sanctimonious man, who converses only with God and Angels, nothing is sacred, and he now rips to shreds . . . hexameters . . . the noblest creation of the noblest folk . . . into his free rhythms. . . . It is impotence turned lyrical drivel, all sucked out of nihilism. . . . All is nothingness, only the

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> Angels exist, a little, as if by mistake. . . . For he is unstable, everything slips through his fingers, it is all mere associative prattle . . . rags.

Something comparable was stated by Hofmannsthal, Rilke's friendly rival (the only other one, Stefan George, was less friendly) in a letter of 1927: "The *Elegies*, I believe, are simply not good—they lack that rarest rhythmical inspiration, which alone can legitimize this highest poetic mode."

But back to Gass, who describes Rilke's psychological pattern as follows:

> First, he expects of ordinary life far more than it can possibly produce. . . . Second, he consequently enters a state of dismay and disappointment. Third, he requires of the poet . . . an elevated life anyway. Fourth, the poet, in order to lead that elevated life, is forced to accept and praise the same ordinary world he began by disdaining.

And Gass proceeds to illustrate this practice with wit and insight. In short, "Rilke takes away with one hand, and gives with another . . . what he gives is always a task."

And then the women: "Orpheus did not fare well at their hands, hands which tore him to pieces. So unless the women are both young and dead, the poet will not praise—he'll blame." Again: "Irony might save some of these poems, but Rilke is rarely ironic." Then another grammatical whopper in Gass's rendering of the Eighth Elegy: "one of those Etruscan souls who has [sic] flown from the corpse." Indeed, by way of putative interpretation, Gass writes his own poem:

> Show the Angel a billfold that has ridden in the rear pocket on someone's rump, the creases it now contains, where money and credit cards once slid in and out, as oiled and stained as a fielder's glove . . . or a mohair sofa, shiny where the man wearing that billfold sat, or the cat curled, or love was made.

Elsewhere in overlong sentences on pages 181–182, Gass explicates away fulsomely, sometimes in Kantian terms, and is hard to follow.

Yet his final apotheosis of poetry, Rilke's and others', is eloquent enough for extensive quoting.

> The poem is thus a paradox. It is made of air. It vanishes as the things it speaks about vanish. It is made of music, like us, "the most fleeting of all" yet it is also made of meaning that's as immortal as immortal gets on our mortal earth; because the poem will return, will begin again, as spring returns: it can be said again, sung again, is our only answered prayer; the poem can be carried about more easily than a purse, and I don't have to wait, when I want it, for a violinist to get in key, it can come immediately to mind—to my mind because it is my poem as much as it is yours—because, like a song, it can be sung in many places at once—and danced as well, because the poem becomes a condition of the body, it enlivens our bones, and they dance the Hardy, the Hopkins, the Valéry, the Yeats; because the poem is a state of the soul, too (the soul we once had), and these states change as all else does, and these states mingle and conflict and grow weak or strong, and even if these verbalized moments of consciousness suggest things which are unjust or untrue when mistaken for statements, when rightly written they are real; they themselves *are* as absolutely as we achieve the Real in this unrealized life—*are*—are with a vengeance; because, oddly enough, though what has been celebrated is over, and one's own life, the life of the celebrant, may be over, the celebration is not over, the celebration goes on.

So what hath Gass wrought? Not a biography or a work of criticism. He has written an extended freeform essay circling around his subject, bringing in biography and criticism wherever it suited him. Quite aside from how one feels about specifics, his book, qua genre, is commendable down to its agreeable length: not counting the complete *Duino Elegies* at the end, 180-odd pages.

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But what about the *Elegies* themselves? Ten longish poems about so many diverse things: the poet, fear, the Angel, the Saint, the Hero, Death, women (early deceased or jilted), the dead in their afterlife, not according to any known religion. Can the center hold when there is no center? Despite some fine passages, there is no whole here. There could have been more or less of it with much the same effect. A great, baggy monster.

Yet Rilke was a real poet, and I'll adduce one of my favorite quatrains of his from an uncollected poem, one of two written for Marthe Hennebert, a wretched working-class girl he picked up in the summer of 1911 on a Paris street.

> Befriedigungen ungezählter Jahre
> sind in der Luft, voll Blumen liegt dein Hut
> und der Geruch aus deinem reinen Haare
> mischt sich mit Welt als wäre alles gut.
>
> Appeasements of innumerable years
> are in the air, your hat lies full of flowers
> and the scent from your pure hair
> mingles with world as if all were well.

Thus speaks the poet to his momentary girl in a *Grande Jatte* setting.

No one in German handled sound and rhyme better than Rilke. We should note the *u*'s in lines two and three, the *i*'s in line four, the alternation of well-chosen feminine and masculine rhymes, the inner rhyme of *deinem reinen*. Also the progression from peace, through idyllicism, to the quietly devastating *as if*: as if all were well. Four simple German words exude the impermanence of joy, the sense of human transience, the skull that lurks in Arcadia.

Let me conclude by comparing Gass's and two other recent translations of the *Duino Elegies*.[2] I pick, almost at random, this from the "Seventh Elegy": "Hiersein ist herrlich. Ihr wusstet es, Mädchen, *ihr* auch,/ die ihr scheinbar entbehrtet, versankt—, ihr, in den ärgsten/ Gassen der Städte, Schwärende, oder dem Abfall/ Offene." I translate: "Being here is resplendent. You knew it, girls, *you* too,/ who seemed to do without, who sank—, you, in the most wretched/ streets of the cities, festering, or rife for the refuse heap." In Edward Snow's new, properly bilingual and annotated edition, this reads: "*Life* here is magic. Even *you* knew that, you girls/ who seemed deprived of it, who were trapped in the city's vilest streets, festering there, or cast aside/ for rubbish." In Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebmann's attractive *The Essential Rilke*, this becomes: "Being here is glorious. You knew it, you girls, you, also/ who seemed left out, who sank—you, into the most squalid streets of the city, festering, open to/ garbage." And finally Gass: "It is breathtaking simply to be here. Girls, even you/ knew, who seemed so deprived, so reduced, who became/ sewers yourselves, festering in the awful alleys of the city."

Obviously, the original is best. *Hiersein ist herrlich* is untranslatable in its simplicity, directness, cadence, and music. Equally clearly, Gass's chatty, prolix way with it is too prosaic, and "who became sewers yourselves" is offensive. But Snow's version is either too grandiose or too colloquial. Kinnell's *glorious* is correct but a bit flat; his *into* for *in* is plain wrong. *Garbage*, though correct, has taken on other, unwanted English meanings. *Rubbish* is better. Gass's "awful alleys" suggests back streets of crime rather than mere squalor. Snow's *trapped* is less imaginative than *sank*.

Even in this short fragment Gass comes off worst, and he can also be downright incorrect, as when, in the "Fifth Elegy," he renders the *selten zärtliche Mutter*, (which Kinnell rightly translates as "seldom tender mother") as "one seldom allowed to be your mother," though here Snow's "your remote mother" is rather too weak as well. A trying business, translation; but, all the same, it must be tried.

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2 *The Duino Elegies*, translated by Edward Snow (North Point Press, 112 pages, $20) will be published in February 2000. *The Essential Rilke*, translated by Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebmann; Ecco Press, 128 pages, $22.95.

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The Saint-Saëns enigma

by R. J. Stove

Poor Saint-Saëns! He was blessed from childhood with a polished facility of utterance that made most of his fellow composers (Ravel excepted) seem like hysterical tyros by comparison. But somehow, even at the apex of his renown, Camille Saint-Saëns remained eminently patronizable. Just how high his repute was during this century's early decades, within France above all, bears remembering. Saint-Saëns—he died in 1921, having exercised his creativity for a record-breaking eighty-two years—lived to see a statue of himself unveiled at Dieppe, outside a museum that displayed, to edify pilgrims, such relics as his great-aunt's pincushion. Gounod called him in complete seriousness "the French Beethoven." The novelist Camille Mauclair likened Saint-Saëns's artistic achievements to Racine's; in 1919 a Parisian critic, Jean Montargis, ranked Saint-Saëns alongside Berlioz and Rameau as one of France's three greatest musicians; and French peasant women with more piety than literacy mistook cigarette cards containing Saint-Saëns's portrait for holy pictures of a saint called Saëns.

Yet the more tributes officialdom heaped on him (these included the Legion of Honor, the German Order of Merit, doctorates from Oxford and Cambridge, and a request—which he declined—to write Turkey's national anthem), the more his detractors scorned him as the musical equivalent of an *artiste pompier*. Romain Rolland confided to his diary in 1907 that Saint-Saëns's "music hasn't the slightest interest . . . one can talk for hours, among musicians, of French music without even thinking of pronouncing the name of Saint-Saëns." Ravel, nine years later, was much more pert:

> Saint-Saëns has informed a delighted public that since the war began he has composed music for the stage, solo songs, an elegy, and a piece for the trombone. If he'd been making shell-cases instead it might have been all the better for music.

To personal irritation at Saint-Saëns's liverish temperament (the late Martin Cooper, a British musical journalist of considerable wit and patchy erudition, described the Frenchman as having died "full of years and malice") was added, especially after his death, resentment at his proud anti-modernist stance. He struck self-conscious avant-gardists as that most vexing of figures: an anti-modernist who once had been a pro-modernist. Though in youth he had shocked diehards by championing Wagner, he afterwards placed strict, perhaps excessive, limits on his own capacity for musical tolerance. In particular, he refused—both as composer and as critic—to accept the "historical inevitability" of Debussy's musical revolution. With considerable skill, he contrived to finesse Debussy out of a widely expected place in the Académie des Beaux-Arts (while aggravating the affront by maintaining unruffled politeness to Debussy's face).

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Therefore, Debussy's own claque could, and still can, see in him nothing more than a dangerous fool.

Only in the 1980s did Saint-Saëns's representation in concert halls outside France amount to more than the few, seldom characteristic, popular hits—*Carnival of the Animals*, *Danse Macabre*, the *Organ Symphony*, the Second Piano Concerto, a couple of snippets from *Samson et Dalila*—which had kept his name barely alive during the previous five decades. And not till the 1990s did an adequate cross-section of Saint-Saëns's oeuvre become available. Even today, most of it remains invisible under library shelves' dust: who now can boast familiarity with his operas *Henry VIII*, *Ascanio*, *L'Ancêtre*, or *La Princesse Jaune*? With his English-language oratorio *The Promised Land*, his ballet *Javotte*, his two-piano *Variations on a Theme of Beethoven*? With his incidental music to Alfred de Musset's play *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, his Second Cello Concerto, his psalm setting "Super flumina" with its outlandish instrumental accompaniment of four saxophones, or, indeed, with two-thirds of the 169 pieces that he allowed to see publication?

The oddest thing about the collapse in Saint-Saëns's stock on the bourse of musical opinion was its suddenness. At least most other casualties of changing musical fashions over the last century and a half experienced generations of unquestioned acclaim. Think of Louis Spohr, who as late as the 1870s was often regarded as Beethoven's superior; or Johann Nepomuk Hummel, assumed by most nineteenth-century music-lovers to be incomparably more gifted than Schumann; or even Anton Rubinstein, who was credited for decades with an importance in Russian music far surpassing Tchaikovsky's. Long after their deaths, their output retained a kind of musical half-life, surviving (for the most part deservedly) in the music lists of choral societies and amateur instrumentalists, if forgotten everywhere else.

Saint-Saëns proved less lucky. When so famous a conductor as Sir Thomas Beecham was reprehended by Britain's *Musical Times* for reviving Saint-Saëns's "meretricious pieces," executants who lacked Beecham's popularity and egotism had little incentive to spring to Saint-Saëns's defense, and seldom found the outcome profitable if they did. Not even Toscanini could ensure lively sales for the *Organ Symphony* when, in old age, he recorded it.

The preferred *modus operandi* for Saint-Saëns's detractors had long since become clear: they could not deny his technical brilliance, *ergo* technical brilliance in itself had to be deplored. Saint-Saëns, it must be confessed, gave them some encouragement in this attitude, as did his friends. Berlioz had commented that the young Saint-Saëns "knows everything but lacks inexperience." (He thus anticipated a quip of Pétain, who once rebuked some unrelentingly clever technocrat with the words "That man knows everything and knows nothing else.") Saint-Saëns himself, with some truth but with little prudence, had told a Berlin interviewer that he produced music "as an apple tree produces apples." Mere musical excellence could perhaps be tolerated, but Saint-Saëns combined his gifts in the musical world with an ability to write poems and plays that were, at the very lowest estimate, unfailingly craftsmanlike; essays—now autobiographical, now didactic—as compulsively readable today as they were when first penned; and useful contributions to the specialist journals of disciplines as far apart as archaeology and astronomy. After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

Unsurprisingly, then, biographers have tended to leave Saint-Saëns severely alone. After a flurry of brief, affectionate, and often superficial reminiscences in both English and French—one 1923 production by the composer's colleague Jean Bonnerot, itself only lightly revised from a study which Bonnerot had published during his subject's lifetime, carried discretion to the point of leaving Saint-Saëns's marriage entirely unmentioned—a bored silence fell. The Francophone music-lover wanting accurate, up-

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to-date information on Saint-Saëns found himself in a still worse plight than his English-speaking counterpart, since the composer's widow died only in 1950 (aged not far short of one hundred), and seems to have been exceptional even by French relicts' standards for her unwillingness to help possibly irreverent researchers. In 1965 the British academic James Harding gave us the beautifully written *Saint-Saëns and his Circle*, which still serves as most people's introduction to the composer. But Harding had little discernible interest in the man's music—as distinct from his life—and his refusal to provide sources for his quotations, however outrageously entertaining, rendered the volume useless from a scholar's standpoint. Subsequent studies by Michael Stegemann—*Camille Saint-Saëns and the French Solo Concerto* (1991)—and Rollin Smith—*Saint-Saëns and the Organ* (1992)—had strictly musicological rather than biographical aims.

Now, by one of those coincidences common in the publishing world, a famine is followed by a glut: two books on Saint-Saëns the man—*Camille Saint-Saëns: A Life of Unequalled Achievement*, by Brian Rees, and *Saint-Saëns: A Critical Biography*, by Stephen Studd—have appeared within a few months of each other.[1] Neither can match Harding's account in terms of prose quality, but of the two, the latter is superior in every respect. Shorter, more energetic, and possessed of much greater aplomb than its rival, Studd's production has about it something of the unaffected, almost balletic grace that marks its subject's style. Rees's account, half as long again as Studd's, and rather less than half as spirited, too often suggests an overcoat so baggy that it obscures its protagonist within its capacious folds. Nor can its author's use of "whither" to mean "whence," his Harding-like failure to furnish citations, his conscientiously "non-sexist" grammar ("a remarkable creation by someone in *their* ninth decade"), his obvious antipathy to the active voice, or his extraordinary assertion that Psalm 18 depicts "the power of a kind of sun god in the universe" (Teilhard de Chardin, are you listening?) inspire enthusiasm for his wider judgments. Where Rees does score over Studd is in his book's typographical standards. Studd's work, though in other respects most handsomely presented, was clearly proofread by someone ignorant of its subject: thus "Zenta," the pseudonym of Saint-Saëns's first love Augusta Holmès, becomes "Zeuta," and the former *New York Times* music critic Harold Schonberg becomes "Schönberg," as if he were related to the composer.

Saint-Saëns's own career hardly abounds in the sort of lurid circumstance, let alone scandal, dear to the biographer's heart. The life of any *compositeur maudit*—a Tchaikovsky, a Mahler, a Liszt—almost writes itself; Saint-Saëns, like Puccini, Dvořák, and Richard Strauss, presents chroniclers with the far more demanding task of making vivid a man resoundingly commonplace in all respects save the fact of possessing awesome musical aptitude. Even in his most intimate prose works he is very much *l'homme moyen*, although hardly *sensuel*.

Of course, little facts like these must not be allowed to discourage the PC-infected mind, which in the late 1980s and 1990s has decided to interpret the sheer conventionality of Saint-Saëns's person as overwhelming proof of sexual deviance. Thus, Time-Warner's recording division chose in 1996 to include Saint-Saëns on a compilation CD entitled *Out Classics*, along with such indubitable—indeed, "outed"—homosexuals as Tchaikovsky, Britten, and Copland. To call the documentation for Saint-Saëns's ostensible activities in this direction meager would be to flatter it absurdly. He

1 *Camille Saint-Saëns: A Life of Unequalled Achievement*, by Brian Rees; Chatto & Windus, 495 pages, $45. *Saint-Saëns: A Critical Biography*, by Stephen Studd; Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 320 pages, $49.50. Connoisseurs of Anglo-American nuances will note with interest that the British edition of Rees's volume is titled, more modestly and less questionably, *Camille Saint-Saëns: A Life*.

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once or twice penned gushing letters to his pupil and friend Fauré, but such sentiments were par for the nineteenth-century course. Occasional transvestism on Saint-Saëns's part is hardly confirmation of an untamed homosexual id; after all, that untamed heterosexual Kenneth Tynan shared the same taste. (Saint-Saëns's reedy, charmless speaking voice, with its much-mocked lisp—enemies took particular delight in quoting his scornful references to Debussy's "*Pélleath et Mélithande*"—made him especially sought-after for women's roles in a pantomimic context. Among his party-pieces was an uncannily accurate impersonation of Madame Carvalho, who sang Marguérite at the première of Gounod's *Faust*, and whose foible it was to perform that opera's Jewel Song a fraction sharp.) Reynaldo Hahn, Proust's lover—whose delicately fashioned songs Saint-Saëns esteemed—insisted that Saint-Saëns travelled the world mainly to indulge his taste for rough trade. Alas for gossips, Hahn's assurance has no stronger factual basis than his own scandalmongering zeal. Both Rees and Studd, after examining the evidence, come to the unavoidable verdict: "Not proven." The whole topic, in any case, lacks the aura of appealing martyrdom that Wilde's fate possesses, since in Saint-Saëns's France homosexual behaviour was legal, as it had been since Napoleon's reign.

It could well be that Hahn arrived at unwarranted conclusions thanks to Saint-Saëns's mother, of whose interference many a son would pray to be rid. Like everyone else who dealt with Saint-Saëns in his boyhood, and like many who knew of him only through news reports, his mother was amazed by his brilliance. When only three, he gave the world his first composition. In his eleventh year, he finished a public concert by offering, as an encore, to play any Beethoven sonata from memory (thereby adding chutzpah to expertise, since at this time any solo pianist who performed without the music in front of him was considered scandalously disrespectful towards the composer's wishes). Yet by obvious contrast to César Franck (whom Saint-Saëns always disparaged), Mozart, Beethoven, and other great composers who had been child prodigies, Saint-Saëns escaped the drudgery of overt parental exploitation. His mother's dominance was of a subtler kind. She tested ever his filial piety by continuing to intercept and read his correspondence when he was already in his mid-twenties, and she made it abundantly clear that he was far too exalted a being to degrade himself by wedlock. At the age of thirty-four, having expressed apprehension about appearing alongside another brilliant pianist, he received from his mother the following philippic:

> You make me ill with your fears. I used to think you a man; you are merely a coward. I treat you with contempt. . . . I believed I had brought up a man. I have raised up only a girl of degenerative stock. . . . Play as you ought to play—an artist of great talent. Either you will play well, or I will renounce you as my child.

With a mother capable of writing that, Saint-Saëns hardly needed a mother-in-law.

His own matrimonial experience was brief and disastrous. Characteristically for one who would repeatedly tell his more flamboyant piano pupils "*Surtout, pas d'emotion!*," he could not steel himself to propose marriage in person; instead he wrote to one Jean Truffot, to whose sister he had become attracted, asking whether Truffot would like to be his brother-in-law. The union with Marie Truffot produced two sons, and ended in horror. One day the elder son leaned over the balcony of the family's apartment, lost his balance and fell onto the cobbles of the street below. He was killed instantly. Little more than a month later, the younger boy perished of pneumonia. Saint-Saëns maintained the pretence of spousal devotion for another three years; then, without saying a word, he left Marie forever. His mother had industriously poured into his ears assurances that Marie had killed her own children through sheer negligence. The

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Saint-Saëns family could not very well keep her away from the composer's state funeral, but they froze her out of every other function involving her husband, both before and after his death.

From the 1881 collapse of Saint-Saëns's marriage dates his obsessive globetrotting as pianist, composer, and conductor. He visited every continent except Australia and Antarctica, and never missed an opportunity to hymn the weird and wonderful animal life he discovered: huge spiders adorning the telegraph poles of Cochin-China, sea creatures that he kept in bottles and added to his lovingly tended collection, the Nile Valley's frogs whose stentorian croaks he commemorated in his Fifth Piano Concerto. Like many a misanthrope before and after him, he found in animals a gratifying devotion—or at least indifference—that he missed in human beings. Much of his aversion to Catholicism derived from animals having been ill-treated before his eyes in Italy and Spain, while in Africa he saw

> horrible, unimaginable things which my pen balks at describing. When Buddha taught his followers the doctrine of metempsychosis he ensured an excellent way of protecting animals, whereas Christianity abandons them to every sort of brutality by proclaiming that they are made for man and therefore at his mercy.

The Paris Conservatoire's bosses had refused to give Saint-Saëns—as their successors refused to give Ravel, Milhaud, or Messiaen—the *Prix de Rome*, which went instead to such towering geniuses as Aymé Kunc, Victor Sieg, and P. Véronge de la Nox. Stupidity on this scale, with all the bureaucratized rancor of which the French artistic mind is capable, not only intensified Saint-Saëns's preference for the brute creation over *Homo sapiens*, but also confirmed his belief that if he had to associate with his own species at all, he might as well start at the top. Collecting royals with the same avidity that lesser men confine to collecting stamps, Saint-Saëns secured acquaintanceship—and in some instances friendship—with Queen Victoria, Edward VII (for whom Saint-Saëns was occasionally mistaken in the street), Queen Alexandra (who poured him tea, he afterwards boasted, "with her own royal and imperial hands"), Prince Gustaf of Sweden (who, two years before ascending the throne as Gustaf V, sent the composer a telegram of seventieth-birthday congratulations), Spain's Queen Regent Maria Cristina (Alfonso XIII's mother), Portugal's Luiz I, Belgium's Albert I, and (most controversially) Kaiser Wilhelm II, whose sense of mission to teach the world the error of its ways exceeded even Saint-Saëns's own.

The composer's deference towards the Kaiser looks at first strange, because earlier accounts of Saint-Saëns's career leave the impression that his early regard for Wagner, and for German culture in general, was a youthful indiscretion. This belief Saint-Saëns himself assiduously fostered, once chauvinism had more or less totally vanquished aesthetic discrimination in his later years. (During World War I he not only demanded that German music be banned from French concert halls, but asserted that "It is now as impossible for any Frenchman to ask to hear Wagner's operas as it would be to applaud a marvellous singer who had assaulted one's mother.") After the documentation that Rees and Studd supply on Germany's contribution to Saint-Saëns's artistic development, no misapprehension is possible. Decades before France could be prevailed on to consider Saint-Saëns more than a virtuosic hack, Germany regarded him as one of his age's supreme musicians. Joining in the chorus of astonishment was Wagner, who heard Saint-Saëns at the piano and noted:

> With an unparalleled sureness and rapidity of glance with regard even to the most complicated orchestral score, this young man combined a not less remarkable memory. He was not only able to play my scores, including *Tristan*, by heart, but could also reproduce

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their several parts, leading or minor themes, and with such precision that one might easily have thought that he had the music before his eyes.

Saint-Saëns returned the compliments, reassuring the master of Bayreuth by his declaration that "Wagnerphobia is an illness." Wagner's approval was short-lived, and at last turned into contempt: "his stupendous receptivity . . . was not accompanied by any corresponding intensity of productive power, so that when he tried to set up as a composer I quite lost sight of him." Still, other German musicians retained their loyalty to Saint-Saëns; thanks to their support (as well as to Liszt's indomitable efforts), *Samson et Dalila* reached performance at Weimar in 1877, fifteen years before the Paris Opéra condescended to stage it. Most French critics irked Saint-Saëns by condemning his manner as too impossibly Germanic for words, simply because it avoided aping the conspicuous Italianisms of Rossini and Verdi. Well after his own admiration for Wagner had died, Paris's fourth estate continued to denounce Saint-Saëns's music as "Wagnerian," and by implication somehow treasonous: though Parisian theaters' refusal to take up Wagner's mature works before the 1890s scarcely suggests an irresistible victory on Wagner-lovers' part, or any immediate need for French music to have a *cordon sanitaire* of patriotism flung around it for protection against Wagnerian plague-germs.

High claims have been made—Rees and Studd both echo them—for Saint-Saëns as an operatic composer. Certainly his operas contain musical invention much more substantial than their overall obscurity implies, but whether this invention is convincingly operatic, as distinct from symphonic, remains dubious. If Mencken was right in arguing that to excel on the opera stage "one must be a sort of Barnum," then Saint-Saëns had less natural affinity with the opera stage than almost any distinguished musician since 1800. The trajectory of Saint-Saëns's theatrical career followed the most frustrating path possible: an unexpected and understandable early hit (in the shape of *Samson*), then flop after flop. A man without innate theatrical flair may still produce an acclaimed operatic masterwork—think Beethoven—but he will find it difficult to repeat such a popular success. He will exacerbate his own problems if, like Saint-Saëns, he undergoes repeated trouble in the libretto department. A born operatic composer would never fall into the error Saint-Saëns committed: jettisoning the best librettist he ever had, *Samson*'s Fernand Lemaire, in favor of one Louis Gallet, whose texts for *Ascanio*, *Proserpine*, and other operas are so convoluted as to make the much-derided plot-lines for *Il Trovatore* and *Simon Boccanegra* appear triumphs of Aristotelian discipline. The lives of Puccini and Strauss repeatedly reveal that any budding operatic composer—unless, like Wagner, he combines musical with authorial propensities—should inculcate in all librettists the same panic-stricken reverence that Richelieu inspired in Louis XIII. Conversely, the numerous operatic stillbirths that clouded Schubert's happiness indicate the folly of lavishing music (in Schubert's case, always admirable and sometimes glorious) on whatever doggerel versifiers submit.

The best Saint-Saëns lies elsewhere. At this stage recommending *Carnival of the Animals* would be almost as insolent as deriding it; Saint-Saëns himself feared the seductive power of his *grande fantaisie zoologique* (his own phrase) to such an extent that he forbade publication of any of it except "The Swan" during his own lifetime. (Oddly, neither Rees nor Studd bothers to mention the use of Saint-Saëns excerpts—not from the *Carnival,* but from the *Organ Symphony*—in the soundtrack of that *grande fantaisie zoologique et cinématique* from 1995, *Babe*.) But in everything he wrote which is now available—an indispensable qualification, as will by now be clear—there remains, even on the rare occasions where no other musical virtues exist, the eerie fascination deriving from technical supremacy

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at its most supreme. And despite the charges of insufficient originality that the composer has incurred, Georges Servières—the best among his early biographers—made a valid point: "No-one has been able to write a pastiche of Saint-Saëns." Considering how much Debussy, Rachmaninoff, and Delius have suffered from their hordes of imitators, this is praise indeed. True, one might have to take on trust the vehement adulation and equally vehement opposition that several Saint-Saëns pieces inspired at their first appearance. Compositions like the Third Piano Concerto, which now would offend only through their unremitting suavity, were then the pretext for verbal and physical mayhem, as supporters and derogators of Saint-Saëns's style went beyond mere censure and took to beating each other up.

As for Saint-Saëns's collected journalism, the interest that his good sense inspires for 90 percent of the time is, if anything, heightened by the moments when he projects onto other artists his own tendencies towards spiritual desiccation. If he truly believed (which presumably he did, lying not being one of his vices) that Palestrina's output represents "an impassive and expressionless art . . . the finest example of art for art's sake," one can only wonder how much Palestrina he had heard, and can only be grateful that he never attempted to perform music which he so comprehensively misunderstood.

More typical of the man, and more consistently satisfying, are his commentaries on the musical traditions that he both upheld and enriched. Without the philosophical depth or the polyglot understanding of a T. S. Eliot, Saint-Saëns nevertheless acquired an Eliot-like view of art, and a trenchancy in voicing this view, probably unique in music's annals. Studd, in the shrewdest observation that either biography can show, speaks of Saint-Saëns "extending to his art the impersonal quality of the hotel rooms, ship cabins, and railway carriages which had become his habitat." Eliot would surely have approved of so bleakly unsentimental an outlook, however much self-deception it entailed, given the ample emotional charge of Saint-Saëns's finest pieces.

That Saint-Saëns's classicism had nothing in it of mere frigidity, but was a defensive measure which he needed to contain emotions bordering on the volcanic, is indicated by the ferocity (sharpened with periodic wit) with which he assailed atonal music:

> There is no longer any question of adding to the old rules new principles which are the natural expression of time and experience, but simply of casting aside all rules and every restraint. "Everyone ought to make his own rules. All aggregations of notes are legitimate."
>
> That is called, and they [atonalists] believe it, the *development of taste*.
>
> He whose taste is developed by this system is not like the man who by tasting a wine can tell you its age and its vineyard, but he is rather like the man who with perfect indifference gulps down good or bad wine, brandy or whisky, and prefers that which burns his gullet the most.

And to us infinitely fortunate contemporaries of Mapplethorpe, of Andres Serrano, of Gilbert and George, the following lines—from one of Saint-Saëns's last public lectures—have perhaps a still greater ability than they did in 1919 to haunt and to chasten: "One can become accustomed to uncleanliness, to vice, even to crime. . . . Why cannot we understand that in art, as in everything else, there are some things to which we must not become accustomed?"

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Four poems
by William Logan

Swans

Cambridge, off-season. The old city mortared to new age,
Victorian terrace houses razed and rebuilt for business—
young men in flash suits own the footpaths.

Each railway viaduct to London frizzes with buddleia
the "butterfly" bush, cocked refugee of empire,
amethyst spray as its roots drive home the cracks.

We were locked to the faith of another England,
shadowy walks up the weed-choked Cam,
a few lonely, out-of-work swans paddling to the bank

to hiss, or croak, or croak-hiss. Silence
drained the tributaries. The sculls, the boathouses,
stammered in reflection, not themselves or quite

themselves, the water views Canaletto made fetish of,
searing Venice in the seductive texture of oil,
then grinding scenes out, one after another,

until each cast its palsied shadow on the last.
We wandered spaded banks, mere ghosts of our young selves,
still thirty and each cool arch bewitching to the eye.

Two godlike men laid Flemish bond in the aftermath,
a dwarf apprentice hurling mortar, load after load,
into the ditch. The wall rose as the mortar fell.

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Samphire

Girls from the language schools go chittering
in birdlike tongues, thin-breasted, doe-eyed,
Spanish or Italian, full of hormones, angst, vocabulary.

You caught me eyeing a Swede with bee-stung lips,
Botticelli face in a virgin's halo of blonde.
Her breasts spelled desire through her cotton shirt.

A summer ago we stood unhappy, ill through our bones,
not able to speak in the hail of argument
and never sure, after, if our non-arguments survived.

Is *aphasia* the rain shower against speech,
or loss of memory of speech, the unspoken
burning in half-life longer than what surfaces?

I'm grateful for what you have chosen to ignore.
This summer, hand in hand, we discover again
cowpath walks worming our medieval city, home

further than ever and myriad ways not to return.
In the market we buy tidal samphire, Shakespeare's
drenched vegetable, or Gloucester's, or Edgar's,

bulbous, green and salty, stripped hot with the teeth,
and not Shakespeare's after all, we learn by the book.
O vegetable love, a different vegetable entirely.

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Deceit

Death never/always betrays retrospection. Thou
Shalt Not guards the approaches: an asphalt road,
a badly constructed hill, the view laid out

where all the patchwork fields lie in error.
Down through the medieval ridge and furrow,
summer lingers for the historical winter.

In a candlelit hall, the eighteenth-century sheep
make their excuses and rise to depart;
the hero folds his cards and slinks away.

Who is not satisfied his superiors were mistaken,
that no one should feel guilty making a packet of money
or asking the shy girl to go to bed just once?

The eclipse comes round, late in the millennium,
each night a weed torn from a better idea,
the garden rooted in Europe's understairs philosophy,

where every sheep is equal to every other
and all the cows are encouraged to form parliaments
and elect representatives who respect them.

No one can remain neutral when the age
catches us acting briefly, mistakenly human,
each Machiavel who began as humble murderer.

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The river

Zero hour. The streets cooling in aftermath,
papers offered news new-risen each morning
in the communion wafer of overnight knowledge.

Agents unlocked their shops to fresh loaves
cheaper than newsprint and without headlines.
The river lay overgrown like a black mirror. *The Mirror*.

The Sun. Along the common, dark-stippled with dew,
no swans broke the burnished, unconscious waters.
Their diligent ancestors breasted the sluggish stream

proudly, as befitted feathered property of a queen.
Local constables have been dragging the river—
gaffhooked bikes lay on the bank, twisted like corpses.

A weedy Cerberus squatted, fax machine hauled
blind from the depths. Everywhere riverboats
have moored illicitly—patched, doleful city afloat,

each roof hauling a woodpile like a preposterous hat.
And then, as the old gasworks rose into sight,
a kingfisher darted upriver, metallic blue.

O Daily Telegraph, O Daily Mail, O The Times.
Give us a sign. We would have a wonder and a sign.
A crossbow bolt soon lost to the willows.

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Theater

Stephen, Edna & the sheikh

by Mark Steyn

The most revealing moment in Broadway's new Stephen Sondheim revue is not a musical one, but the opening statement, which, as with those announcements about strobe lighting and theatergoers with pacemakers, is delivered as a warning: "If you are put off by the idea of thinking, go see *Cats*," says Bronson Pinchot, dressed as an usher and draped casually over the lip of the Ethel Barrymore's stage.

Got it, Bronson. This is the thinking man's *Cats*, right? Unfortunately, not all my fellow audience members are as smart as I am, so Mr. Pinchot feels obliged to spell it out. *Putting It Together*, he says, is not a "revue" but a "review." And why would that be? "Because," he says, "Stephen Sondheim expects you to think."

Well, I did. What I mainly thought, about twenty minutes in, was that I'd rather be at *Kiss Me, Kate*. For thirty years, Sondheim's act has relied on flattering its audience—by reassuring them that the absence of such traditional Broadway virtues as "a good time" is actually a tribute to their intellectual rigor. But it's never been spelt out as baldly as it is here. Or as cynically: *Putting It Together* is, after all, brought to us by the same man who gave us *Cats*—the producer Cameron Mackintosh. So, indirectly, it's brought to us by all those dumb schmucks who flock to Lloyd Webber, since, if not for them, Sir Cameron *wouldn't have been able to afford* indulging himself with this little snob hit. You'd expect even a New York crowd to see through the Pinchot pitch as merely a midtown variation on the emperor's new clothes: to a fool, this evening's performance will seem like a lot of tiresome joyless one-note bitching from a sour old queen; only those possessed of great wisdom and insight will appreciate it as a sardonic multilayered dissection of the vicissitudes of human relationships.

In fact, if you want to think, go to *Cats*. You'll spend most of the time thinking: What the hell is this show about? Conversely, if you're put off by the idea of thinking, head to *Putting It Together*, where the show's thinking is all done for you. Set at a smart cocktail party peopled by characters called The Wife, The Husband, The Younger Man, The Younger Woman, and The Observer, *Putting It Together* has got it all figured out: life is empty, marriage is phony, people are hollow, all is blasé. . . . Mr. Sondheim fleshes this out with many intricate, exhibitionist rhymes and morbid analysis—what's marriage? "Every Day a Little Death"—but, as this selection of thirty-five songs from across thirty-five years emphasizes, his world view has remained remarkably, incessantly consistent. And even the awfulness smells fake—if you compare, say, the casual cruelties of John Updike's *Couples* with the relentless self-examination of Sondheim's lyrics.

The gloom is occasionally lifted by Carol Burnett (in her trademark Bob Mackie glit-

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tery black) and the rest of the cast (in basic black). But it's like trying to be relaxed in a straitjacket. A few years back, the composer Richard Rodney Bennett made an interesting observation to me: as a pianist who's played Rodgers and Kern and Gershwin, he'd concluded that Sondheim songs were not really "standards." You couldn't kick loose and do them in a thousand different ways from waltz time to bossa nova. Every time you try to play around with them, they pull you back into line. That's certainly the case here: you've never seen a cast work so hard at being off-hand; every arched eyebrow seems to be painstakingly raised by forklift. It's like Al Gore practicing being spontaneous.

If there's a silver lining to the Sondheimian cloud, it's that the more the show strains to be biting and contemporary the more dated it looks, suggesting that the theater's veneration of the great man may be just a passing fancy rather than a terminal illness. Bob Crowley's set—all neon and hard plastic—makes the characters seem as if they've just been bickering around in circles ever since the final curtain fell on *Company* twenty-eight years ago. The notion that this show makes you "think" is the saddest of all, since (with the bright exception of the choreographer Bob Avian) nobody involved with this enterprise seems to have questioned any of their preconceptions for decades: for "intellectual rigor," read "intellectual rigor mortis." Rather, you come away marvelling at the banality of the show's idea of smartness. At least, sixty years ago, in a song like Rodgers and Hart's "The Lady is a Tramp," musical comedy was smart enough to mock smartness itself:

> I get too hungry for dinner at eight
> I like the theater but never come late. . . .
>
> I like a prize fight that isn't a fake
> I go to the opera and stay wide awake, etc.

By comparison, the leaden audience-pandering of *Putting It Together* is pitiful. Perhaps the theatrical profession no longer attracts "smart" people, which may explain why the art of revue has dwindled down to this soi-disant "review."

As it is, the nearest thing to a satirical revue on Broadway this season was a recent fundraiser at the Ford Center on 43rd Street, in which Rosie O'Donnell, Alec Baldwin, Lauren Bacall, the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, and President Clinton turned out to salute Hillary Rodham Clinton on her fifty-second birthday. Christine Pedi opened the show dressed as the First Lady in blonde wig and singing "I'll Take Manhattan," backed by the gentlemen of the chorus prancing around as the New York Yankees. Midway through the number, the boys tore off her clothes and put a spangly Liza Minnelli jacket on her. "It was Hillary in all her musical comedy triumph," said Miss Pedi. Next, Kristin Chenoweth sang an aria from *The Enchantress*, a 1918 Victor Herbert operetta, "Art is Calling for Me": "I thought it was fitting," said Miss Chenoweth, "since one of her platforms is the arts." Carolee Carmello sang a medley of Sondheim's precious, overwrought "Children will Listen" and "No One is Alone"—because another of her platforms is children. Marc Kudisch did the "Soliloquy" from *Carousel* with the bit about "My boy Bill" growing up to be president amended to "My gal Hill." Joel Grey performed "If You Could See Her Through My Eyes," which he originally sang to a gorilla in *Cabaret*. The president got out his sax and played "My Funny Valentine," which he dedicated to the First Lady—though, as far as funny valentines are concerned, the laugh's surely on her.

The producers were Broadway veterans Fran and Barry Weissler, and my advice to them is that they should mount a commercial run of the show. You might think it sounds wretchedly earnest—and even die-hard fans of Senator-elect Rodham would rather not mention the Yankees cap and all that. But you could play the show as is to Giuliani supporters and they'd be splitting their sides. It could be the Y2K equivalent of

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Caryl Churchill's play *Serious Money*, a savage indictment of City traders and bankers in Thatcher's Britain that became a huge hit with the very sharks whose immorality it was intended to expose. As one critic observed, it was like seeing *The Diary of Anne Frank* with a coach party of SS officers. Hillary's fundraiser was like seeing *Springtime for Hitler* with a coach party of SS officers—an hilarious spoof that, for some reason, the audience took seriously.

Meanwhile, over at the Booth Theatre, Dame Edna Everage has her own view of the relationship between show and audience: It is, she tells the customers, "a conversation between two people, one more interesting than the other." Or as she can't resist adding: "I wouldn't pay to see you." Dame Edna is the monstrous creation of Barry Humphries. "Drag queen" doesn't begin to cover it: created back in Melbourne in 1955, Humphries's character has evolved into one of the most vivid and detailed personalities of the last half-century. He bills her as "Australia's housewife superstar," which is as deft a summation as any: if you can imagine a smug 1950s Australian suburban matron raised to the level of world stardom, this is it—huge pink sequined gowns, rhinestone spectacles, mauve hair. She has a pianist and two Ednaettes on hand for the odd song, but mostly she reminisces—about her Australian upbringing, her late husband's prostate operation, the Royal Family, the odor from her lesbian daughter's pit bulls—and shares her thoughts on contemporary foibles. The concept isn't so ludicrous: anyone who's ever encountered the great granite-jawed Aussie diva Dame Joan Sutherland off the opera stage can appreciate why Dame Edna isn't entirely implausible.

She's been a star in Britain and Australia for decades, adored by celebrities who line up to be abused by her. One guest was Melvyn Bragg, Britain's arts panjandrum, labour peer, TV host, and writer of prodigious output. Dame Edna asked how many novels he'd written.

"Thirteen," he replied. She then turned to the audience and asked who'd read any of them. Not a single hand went up.

"You're going too fast, Melvyn," she said, sweetly. "We can't keep up with you."

Dame Edna's star has faded a little in London in recent years. Her last West End run received sniffy reviews and never quite caught on with the public. The Dame is not only transvestite but "transgressive," as defenders of the Brooklyn Museum's "Sensation" show like to say. She has no time for the conventional pieties. This was a strong card to play in 1950s Melbourne and even in England until the Seventies. But it's hard to be transgressive in modern Britain: this is a culture in which His Royal Highness the Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex will be greeted on arrival at public functions by cries of "Oy, Edward! You a poof then?" The queen herself was unfavorably compared to Dame Edna after an ill-advised choice of outfit the other day. The British, it seems to me, are more genuinely tolerant than their prissy, diversity-flaunting North American cousins: they don't mind Tony Blair filling his cabinet with gays, but they don't see why they should have to give up making jokes about them. From the Queen to queens, there are hardly any taboos: in such a world, it's all but impossible for Dame Edna to retain her shock value.

But the New World is fresh territory. So, in *Dame Edna's Royal Tour*, she taunts her audience, "*You* can't be politically incorrect. But I can. I can even tell the truth. Remember that? *That's* taking a walk down memory lane!" she cackles. And off she goes, declaring with relish that she's recently discovered she was abused as a child. This apparently universal condition of American life is so routinely derided by British commentators that it comes as something of a shock to see how shocked a Broadway audience is. For a moment, they seem unsure whether this is an appropriate subject for comedy, before apparently reaching a consensus to titter along nervously with it.

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When she comes to her riff on handicapped-accessible bathrooms, the difference between a West End and Broadway crowd is measurable:

"I've always wondered," she says, "what the chrome ladder is for in a handicapped bathroom." In London: huge roar. In New York: no laugh whatsoever.

"What do they get up to in there?" London: even bigger laugh. New York: small, tentative giggle.

"Are they perhaps doing a kind of George Michael over the toilet?" London and New York: sweeping wave of laughter.

By the end, though, she seemed to have won them over. In the West End, anyone unfortunate enough to have been seated in the first eight rows of a Dame Edna show knows enough not to volunteer information. A Broadway audience is still relatively unsuspecting. The lady who vouchsafed that she lived in "a contemporary condo in New Jersey" was rewarded with a doubtful sidelong cutaway from Dame Edna and a gleeful, malicious laugh from the rest of the house. The only folks I've met who've been disappointed have been members of New York's British community, who'd been hoping for more of a full-frontal assault on American attitudes. The neo-monarchical deference extended to leftist orthodoxies on race, sexuality, etc. is certainly stultifying, but, in such a climate, Dame Edna is probably wise to proceed with caution. Her new American fans have fallen on her as they would an oasis in the desert, and who can blame them?

As for "transgressive" art, it depends against whom you're transgressing. Terrence McNally enjoyed a classic cause celeb last year with his play *Corpus Christi*, in which Jesus is a small-town Texan gay who finds spiritual liberation in anal intercourse after he's sodomized by Judas and becomes the "king of the queers." Yawn, yawn, been there, done that, you're probably saying. But McNally's a canny fellow who understands that, in contemporary showbiz, there's nothing like a little light Catholic-baiting to oomph your play out of the arts sections and onto the front page. The worst that can happen is that a few of these hardcore "religious right" types turn up on the sidewalk, necessitating a barricade or two and a posse of New York's finest to escort the cast into the theater, making you look—at least for the purposes of the evening news—like a group of beleaguered dissidents struggling to maintain your right to free expression.

In reality, constraints on free expression fall mainly on the other side. McNally's play isn't so far removed from the gay outreach efforts of the loucher Episcopal bishops, and those clergymen who find themselves doctrinally opposed to, say, Bishop Spong have long since given up addressing the matter for fear of being tarred as "homophobic." Where Christians are concerned, McNally can pretty well mock Christ to his heart's content.

Doubtless, he expected things would go just as swimmingly over in the godless precincts of modern Britain, where I chanced to see the play again a few weeks ago. The London production was as lame and self-indulgent as the Manhattan Theatre Club's. All that had changed was the warm-up act: outside in the street, forty Roman Catholics were silently praying in protest, but also present were a loud group of British Muslims handing out copies of the "fatwa" against McNally just signed by Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad, judge of the Shari'ah Court of the United Kingdom.

Apparently, it had slipped the playwright's mind that Christ is not just a revered figure to wimpy Anglicans but also an honored Islamic prophet, and adherents of the latter faith have little time for an inclusive approach to gay theology. Sheikh Muhammad has decreed that McNally must be arrested and executed by an Islamic authority. The only way he can avoid the fatwa is if he becomes a Muslim. If he simply repents, he will still be executed, but his family will be cared for by an Islamic state and he will be entitled to a Muslim burial.

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McNally is a pleasant enough fellow and, given that he seems an unlikely candidate for Islamic conversion, one wishes him well in keeping one step ahead of Sheikh Muhammad. But he wouldn't be in this predicament if the Christian churches in his own country still had the self-confidence to express clearly and forcefully their revulsion at the author's trivialization of their Lord. At the last Anglican Synod, for example, the Africans were the only bishops willing to take on the trendy gay-pandering American clerics. The left has long believed that blacks', gays', and women's shared victimization by racist white male homophobes is enough to bind the rainbow coalition together. But, if you'd heard Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe at the Commonwealth Conference in November attacking Tony Blair as a "gay gangster" and denouncing a damning report on him as "the work of homosexuals" who were "lower than pigs," you'd have wondered if this was quite what the guys who cooked up the "Celebrate Diversity" bumper sticker had in mind.

McNally's play is a classic product of our "multicultural," "diverse" society in that it reflects only the shrunken, parochial, homogeneous orthodoxy of the world he moves in. It was his misfortune to attract in Britain a wider audience than he'd intended to. A word of advice, Terrence: put the Saudi bus-&-truck tour on hold.

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Art

Rethinking modernism

by Karen Wilkin

The most discussed exhibition of the past few months—at least in some circles—was not the Brooklyn Museum's over-hyped "Sensation," but rather "Modern*starts*: People, Places, Things," the Museum of Modern Art's truly sensational, genuinely provocative multi-disciplinary reconception of how the story of modernism can be told.[1] "Which did you like better," a fellow critic asked me recently, in the midst of talking about something else entirely, "'People' or 'Places'?" "'People!'" "Really?" she asked. "I liked 'Places.'" "But the sculpture room in 'People' is so extraordinary," I said. "Oh, the sculpture room is amazing!," she said. "They should keep that installation. But what about the crime scene photographs in 'Places'?" We went on comparing favorite morsels, each admitting the virtues of the other's selections. "I guess it's like choosing between the Yankees and the Mets," my friend concluded—she's as passionate about baseball as about art. "Modern*starts*" was a main topic, too, at a recent dinner party of artists, critics, and poets (plus a musician, an architect, and an actor). Between a risotto and dessert, we debated, with inconclusive results, the merits of the enormous, flashy painting cum installation of objects from MOMA's collection that introduces the "Things" section of the show.

I've had similar discussions with people both in and out of the art world, with New Yorkers, out-of-towners, and foreign visitors, even with a British sculptor visiting MOMA for the first time. Everyone I've talked to has been excited about "Modern*starts*." It's not surprising. The show is not only large and sumptuous, but what is more important, it is also ambitiously conceived, thoughtful, and thought-provoking. Spanning four decades that fall on either side of the turn of the last century—roughly 1880 to 1920—with a few departures (more about them later), the exhibition focuses on the formative years of modernism, exploring, through works drawn entirely from MOMA's collections, the expansion of aesthetic and technological possibilities during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the optimistic experimentation of artists during the early days of the twentieth century, and the cataclysmic effects of the First World War and its aftermath.

So far this sounds a lot like the usual installation of the second-floor galleries at MOMA: a relatively lucid, linear, chronological exposition of the various "isms" of modernist painting and sculpture, with similar surveys of drawing, photography, and design installed elsewhere, covering the

1 "Modern*starts*: People, Places, Things" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on October 7, 1999, and remains on view until March 14, 2000. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by John Elderfield, Peter Reed, Mary Chan, and Maria del Carmen González, has been published by the Museum of Modern Art and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (360 pages, $55 paper).

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period beginning with Cézanne and, at least since the rehanging after the big Matisse retrospective, ending with Surrealism. But "Modern*starts*" is neither linear nor chronological; it neither segregates works by medium nor gathers them together under the rubric of style or school. Instead, the exhibition is a kind of curator's fantasy come to life: an exuberant, sometimes playful, always absorbing shuffling of works from all media and disciplines—photographs, paintings, sculptures, works on paper, posters, choice items from the architecture and design collections, even the occasional installation and video—loosely grouped under the three umbrellas of "People," "Places," and "Things," with each section filling a floor of the museum. ("Modern*starts*" is apparently the first exhibition involving real collaboration by the curators from the various departments of a famously Balkanized institution; the results make us hope for continued détente.)

Anyone wondering about how the three categories were determined should read the handsomely designed exhibition catalogue, which contains, in addition to brief essays on the show's major themes, a fascinating discussion by John Elderfield of the conception and evolution of "Modern*starts*." Or visit the introductory mini-installation organized around Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911) on MOMA's ground floor, where the Projects exhibitions are usually to be found. A remarkably condescending wall text points out that *The Red Studio* is obviously inspired by a real place specific to a particular person, that it alludes in many different ways to people and things, and that it is itself an object covered with red pigment, proof that some works of art cannot easily be categorized as people, places, or things; many works assigned to each category, we are told, might have gone elsewhere. Despite this unhelpful information, however, the introductory section, which also includes a 1913 bronze version of Brancusi's *Mlle. Pogany*, a 1914 Picasso canvas, and a vivid poster of a lightbulb from around 1910, sets the stage effectively. Fortunately, too, the text panels elsewhere are more straightforward and informative.

Most of "Modern*starts*," in fact, is exhilarating. Some of it downright thrilling. Occasionally, *very* occasionally, it is—well—the polite term is "overdetermined" or conversely a bit far-fetched, but such lapses are largely overwhelmed by the pleasures afforded by the whole. Each section has a distinct character. "People" is an invigorating mixture of works in different media, arranged in a syncopated, start-stop rhythm. "Places" is divided mainly into photography and painting, organized "horizontally," as befits a section with a strong landscape component. "Things," probably because MOMA's architecture and design department played a significant role in its conception, is the most stylish of the three divisions. Each section, in turn, is punctuated by subheadings such as "Composing with the Figure," "Landscape as Retreat," or "Objects as Subjects," written above the doorways connecting the exhibition spaces. These titles also serve as chapter headings in the exhibition catalogue, which parallels but does not precisely reproduce the exhibition itself. Presumably, these catchphrases offer clues as to why particular works were brought together, but the categories frequently seem rather arbitrary. In the galleries it's easy to ignore them, although they seem convincing enough in the catalogue.

The entrance to each section is framed by mural-sized contemporary works—deliberate exceptions, along with the occasional video within, to the self-imposed time limits of "Modern*starts*"—that serve as connections between past and present. "People" is introduced by a white-on-black Sol LeWitt drawing whose floating arcs and dotted lines are at once a testimonial to human activity and, perhaps fortuitously, a vague evocation of Matissean figures. "Places" is entered through the Venezuelan artist Maria Fernanda's long white wall covered with lush clumps of artificial white lilies improbably sprouting straight out at us; closer inspection reveals delicate arches

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drawn in pencil, which subtly transform the wall into "ground"—as in "figure/ground"—removing the frankly beautiful white on white assemblage from the realm of decoration and turning it into an ambiguous abstraction of landscape space and place. "Things" is announced by the extravaganza that so preoccupied the guests at the dinner I mentioned earlier: the British painter Michael Craig-Martin's brilliantly colored, mechanically generated, sleek improvisation on notions of the object as art and art as object. The piece (a collaboration between the artist and MOMA curators) includes both flatly rendered painted images of such art and design icons from MOMA's collections as chairs by Rietveld and Thonet, Duchamp's urinal and bicycle wheel, an anglepoise lamp, and Malevich's 1918 *Suprematist Composition: White on White* and/or real examples of these objects. Strangely, the presence of the real models for Craig-Martin's hard-edged, poster-flat images turns the painting into a neutral, albeit intensely colored background. It becomes little more than a cheerful, high-style exercise in saturated green, hot pink, blue, and orange.

On one level, "Modern*starts*" can be enjoyed purely as a spectacular showcase for MOMA's own holdings, including a remarkable number of unfamiliar, rarely exhibited works in all media, plus a few promised gifts. It's possible, for instance, to appreciate the sumptuous photography inclusions in "People" and "Places" simply as impressive evidence of the depth of that department's collection. MOMA is rich not only in superb, well-known (and sometimes recherché) images by such celebrated figures as Atget, Lartigue, and Sander, but also in arresting works by anonymous photographers—such as a series documenting the amazing equipment used to build the Panama Canal or the crime scene pictures my friend liked so much. (One of these from the Paris Prefecture of Police, documenting *Madame Simon as She Was Found After the Crime* [1895] is like an illustration for one of Balzac's bleaker tales or, if we ignore Madame Simon's distinctly period boots, a job for Simenon's Inspector Maigret.) But exciting as it is to be reminded of the strength of MOMA's collections, it is not the impressive number of outstanding works in "Modern*starts*" but their imaginative combination that makes the exhibition so compelling.

For those of us raised on MOMA, the new installation is full of surprising revelations—not merely the handful of things we've never seen before, engaging as they are, but the abundance of personal favorites and celebrated modernist icons, magically rejuvenated by being seen in locations and among neighbors often very different from the ones we've learned to associate them with. Just as rehanging the works of art we live with makes us rediscover things we've looked at for years, "Modern*starts*" disrupts our entrenched responses. The effect can be startling, as though works that might never have met under ordinary circumstances were forced into being polite to each other, but more often than not, the result is illuminating. A single vitrine in "Things," for example, assembles such sculptural archetypes as Boccioni's swirling bronze *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912, cast 1931), Picasso's opaque, jagged *Glass of Absinth* (1914) with its precariously balanced spoon, and Meret Oppenheimer's fur-lined teacup of 1936 alongside of a collection of elegant and/or oddball utilitarian objects that includes four geometrically patterned, polychrome Vienna Secession wine glasses, an angular toast rack, and an astonishingly pure, chrome-plated "self-aligning" ball bearing designed in 1929; the combination not only forces us to consider what "Things" terms "Objects as Subjects," but also makes us reflect on the aesthetic (and practical) desiderata affecting both design and art-making at any given moment. Throughout "Modern*starts*," groupings such as this one, by ignoring traditional divisions of works by medium or chronology, encourage us to look hard in order to discover what links and separates the works under review and to isolate their essential formal

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and conceptual qualities; finally, we are compelled to test them against each other.

In the "People" section, for example, the novel side-by-side placement of Matisse's *Piano Lesson* (1916) and Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) collapses the decade that separates them and makes them engage in a sort of arm-wrestling match for "Modernist Paradigm." (I'd call it a draw, in terms of sheer impact, although *Les Demoiselles* looks far more conventional than *Piano Lesson*, like a traditional grand manner figure composition rendered with angles and flat planes instead of voluptuous curves, in contrast to Matisse's utterly unconventional transformation of the bourgeois domestic interior.) Usually, these well-known pictures are separated by an installation dictated by authorship and chronology, yet it makes art-historical sense to put them side by side, since they can both be read in terms of the development of Cubism; *Les Demoiselles* shows us Picasso striding towards an eventual realization of the angular spatial complexities that would preoccupy him for most of the next decade, while in *Piano Lesson* we can see, in addition to Matisse's individual pictorial response to his experience of the world around him, his response to Cubist propositions. Seeing the two pictures together helps us at once to distinguish the profound differences between these powerfully individual artists and to identify the complex crosscurrents that united them.

Some of the pairings in "Modern*starts*" are positively inspired—for one, placing Braque's *Woman with a Mandolin* (1937) beside Matisse's *Woman on a High Stool (Germaine Raynal)* (1914). The pictures, for all their similarities of size, proportion, and subject—each is nominally about a woman seated in a domestic interior—prove to be diametrically opposite, one a celebration of elaboration, the other a demonstration of the benefits of rigorous paring-down. The Braque is a tour-de-force of uninhibited patterns, floating lines, and flat, papery shapes, with everything, including the mandolin player herself, turned into a crisp silhouette; as we expect of Braque, *Woman with a Mandolin* is also a marvel of inventively combined, "off" colors—murky and acidic greens, rough-textured blacks, energizing notes of pink, yellow, and orange. Matisse's picture, by contrast, is a paragon of restraint, an all but uninflected expanse of subtle gray, with the mass of the seated woman's upright presence and the space she occupies carved out only by incisive, economical drawing.

At intervals throughout the show, it appears that the curators of "Modern*starts*" were simply having a wonderful time, revelling in the riches of MOMA's collections. A portion of "Things" devoted to "Nine Guitars" provides a happy excuse to bring together a group of exemplary paintings, collages, constructions, and sculptures by Picasso, Braque, Gris, Laurens, and Le Corbusier, along with a 1924 Torres-Garcia wooden construction that I don't recall seeing before, a charming object notable for its lack of reliance on any of the usual Cubist "signs" for guitar. "Ten Chairs," in the same section, amounts to a semiotic analysis of chairness. Instructive and pleasant as this is, it's reassuring to see that the curators also know when to let well enough alone. In the portion of "Things" dedicated to "Objects on a Table," they are content to hang four Cézannes—two mainstays of the collection, one relatively recent bequest, and a promised gift, all very fine—and let them speak for themselves.

Why, given this multiplicity of delights, did I say I liked "People" best? For two reasons. First: that stunning sculpture room. Just outside it is a selection of Steichen's moody, romantic photographs of Rodin's studio, ending with a brooding vision of the *Monument to Balzac* (1898). Turning to enter the next gallery, we are confronted by the sculpture itself, not isolated on a high pedestal, as we are used to seeing it in MOMA's Sculpture Garden, but on a low plinth, still looming above us because of its great size—an implacable, swollen monolith, at once introspective and

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violent, its brutal mass animated by nervous modelling and the sweeping gesture with which the writer folds himself into his robe. Like the guardian of a sacred precinct, the monumental, familiar *Balzac* introduces a stellar selection of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sculptures made even more mysterious and seductive by the gallery's dark walls and dramatic lighting. The conversation among these works is provocative, complicated, and edifying. It deals with elusive issues of influence and independence, of assimilation and rejection of prototypes, of ways of embodying male and female, and, too, with practical concerns of the effects of choices of scale, materials, finish, and degrees of reference—among other things.

The installation places Matisse's gnarled, robust bronze *The Serf* (1900–04) beside two of Rodin's nude studies for the *Balzac* and one of his striding male figures. The group makes us forcibly aware of the way Rodin haunts Matisse's early sculpture; not only are the pose and surface handling of *The Serf* informed by Rodin's example, but Matisse apparently chose his model because he had posed for the older master. But the group also makes us see the differences between the two men's efforts. Rodin's anatomy-inspired working of the surface is an intensely physical manipulation that, for all its freedom, always remains faithful to the realities of musculature, while Matisse's handling is both rougher and more willful, creating inflections that appear driven by a desire not to recapitulate the sense of touch in visual, sculptural terms, but to reinvent anatomy in terms of spatial articulation. (In her excellent catalogue essay, Beatrice Kernan describes Matisse's response to Rodin as a revelation of the latent modernity of the older sculptor's work.)

There are endless opportunities for this kind of challenging comparison in this dazzling installation: on one side of the gallery, five studies for the head of Balzac, and on the other, Matisse's five heads of Jeannette; further along: Rodin's *Three Shades* (1881–86), Matisse's *Large Seated Nude* (1923–25), signature pieces by Maillol and Lehmbruch, and more. The juxtaposition of a delicate female torso by Lehmbruch and Rodin's ferocious *Headless Naked Figure Study for Balzac* (1896) demands that we think about how differently, in both formal and conceptual terms, male and female bodies can be represented. Rodin's thick-set, muscular figure is, as the title suggests, an emphatically naked man, not a decorous nude. Although from a front view, he seems to hide his genitals with his large hands, a side view leaves no doubt that modesty has nothing to do with it. The urgent modelling and chunky forms of the sculpture seem perfectly in sync with his explicit, shocking gesture, although in this context Kernan's discussion of Rodin's "free, uninhibited handling of the medium" becomes unintentionally ambiguous. Beside this frank exploration of unabashed, if self-sufficient, masculinity is Lehmbruch's suavely modelled, narrow-waisted torso of a young woman, a coolly elegant, introspective sculpture turned into an emblem of tender, appetizing femaleness by the proximity of the brutally vital Rodin; the energetic surfaces, thrusting pose, and robust limbs of the *Headless Naked Figure* heighten our awareness of the refined, geometric underpinnings of Lehmbruch's torso, intensifying our sensitivity to the smooth fullness of the sculpture's forms. Yet, paradoxically, while Rodin's figure seems both metaphorically and literally unselfconscious—its subject seems indifferent to being observed in a private act, and the study presumably exists for the sake of formal exploration, without concern for effect—the Lehmbruch seems eager to please; witness the torso's ingratiating curve that gently "presents" breasts, belly, and sex to the viewer.

The second reason for my leaning towards "People"—a hard call, I admit—is the portion headed "Actors, Dancers, Bathers," which includes such sacrosanct mainstays of MOMA's collections as Cézanne's *Large Bather* (c. 1885) and Matisse's *The Dance (First Version)* (1909) along with a selection

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of equally important prints, drawings, and works on paper. Here the conversation is no less complex than among the sculptures. "Actors, Bathers, Dancers" probes the significance of these time-honored but wholly modern subjects to artists ranging from Degas to Picasso (and an unknown photographer) and examines the evolving meanings of such notions as the spectacle and the pastoral. This section includes that controversial pairing of the Cézanne bather with a large 1993 color photograph of an adolescent boy standing at the edge of the sea, by Rineke Dijkstra. No, the photo isn't as potent as the Cézanne nor anywhere near as good, even in its own terms, but the pairing makes sense when we move into the next gallery to find the little photograph of a nude bather that apparently served Cézanne as a model, unleashing a stream of ruminations about fidelity to perception and direct stimuli, the role of the camera as intermediary and all the rest of it.

"Modern*starts*" keeps provoking this kind of interesting aside. "Places" is a treasury of superb works that deserve attention for their individual merits: Impressionist and Fauvist landscapes, Futurist cityscapes, Expressionist street scenes, and more. Monet's wrap-around *Waterlilies* (c. 1920) suddenly gains a new, enriching context. But the installation also makes us think about the meaning of landscape themes for modernist artists, as well as about the way that the railroad and the automobile changed conceptions of city and country, shortening the distance between isolated places at the same time that these modern marvels and other technologies were changing forever the physical appearance of landscape and urban centers alike. Similarly, in "Things," while the insistence on the identity of subject matter in the portion devoted to "Objects on a Table" at first seems to risk turning the section's marvelous still life paintings into mere illustrations of a point, there are also unexpected rewards. Placing an admittedly handsome octagonal table by William Godwin, made about 1875, next to Matisse's *The Rose Marble Table* (1917) appears to trivialize (and literalize) this miraculously absorbing picture of nothing in particular. Yet it soon becomes clear that such pairings can also underscore the differences between our perception of the real object and the artist's invention—as long as we don't content ourselves simply with recognizing what had been depicted. (In the end, all the exhibited works, both two- and three-dimensional, in "Things" seem to keep changing identities: pictures and sculptures keep asserting themselves as objects, while objects keep insisting on their right to be considered as works of art.) In the same way, "People" raises questions about the nature and role of the portrait, about the formation and perpetuation of identity. And so on.

"Modern*starts*" may have another purpose, too, as a test run for future installations. The planned addition to MOMA, designed by Yoshio Tanaguchi, will allow the creation of galleries of different proportions and in different relationships than the interlocking warren of generally long, skinny spaces that we're all so used to. There is talk of flexible "satellite galleries," accessible from the major spaces, that would permit the periodic creation of smaller exhibitions focusing on particular aspects of the permanent collection, like visual footnotes or link connections on a Web home page. A twenty-first-century audience will be thoroughly used to seeking out and absorbing "information" in such non-linear ways, and while the true strength of any museum has nothing to do with "information," linear or otherwise, but resides in its unique ability to offer first-hand, direct experience of actual works of art, the twenty-first-century Museum of Modern Art will undoubtedly wish to respond to changing mores by presenting its astonishingly rich and varied collections in a variety of ways—ways that are prefigured by "Modern*starts*."

Is the stimulating mix of "People," "Places," and "Things" the ideal approach to presenting MOMA's collection or the best method for describing the complicated adventure that we call "modernism"? Hardly.

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To form a reasonably accurate, informed notion of any art historical issue, we need it all: chronological presentations that illustrate sequences and interrelationships; contextual exhibitions that make clear everything that was going on at a given time, in all its variety; stylistic groupings that allow us to understand specific issues and their permutations; thematic studies that reveal linkages, cross-fertilizations, and reactions; meticulous examinations of individual artists that permit us to follow the evolution of a single personality. We can't do without that kind of traditional scholarship, but we also need shows like "Modern*starts*"—exciting, eye-testing exhibitions that help us to see even the most familiar works with fresh eyes, that encourage us to make new connections, and that both reaffirm our convictions and make us rethink our prejudices. John Elderfield's introductory catalogue essay about the genesis of the show and the curatorial team's evolving ideas about relationships and sequences may also offer a tantalizing glimpse of the future. If so, "Modern*starts*" should make us eager for what comes next.

Exhibition notes

"Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
October 7, 1999–January 17, 2000

Prior to entering the exhibition "Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century," visitors to the Hirshhorn Museum come upon a wall covered with quotations that alternately define, question, repudiate and buttress the subject at hand. These epigrams, which also pepper the text of the catalogue, are fun to read and encompass a variety of figures: from Immanuel Kant, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud to Sophia Loren, Barnett Newman, and Camille Paglia. Yet, taken together, what do these often contradictory comments suggest? That beauty is a multifaceted ideal for which artists should strive? Or that it is a tool of oppression whose time has come? Certainly, the only thing the recent vogue for beauty has done is rendered the term meaningless by linking it with the "transgressive." The best comment on this curiously brittle phenomenon comes from, of all people, Peter Schjeldahl. "There is something crazy," *The New Yorker* art critic rightly declares, "about a culture in which the value of beauty becomes controversial." One hesitates in sanctioning Schjeldahl's opinions—here is, after all, someone whose notion of the beautiful includes Cindy Sherman yet slams the door on Pierre Bonnard—but he has a point. Has beauty really been, as an introductory wall would have us believe, "dismissed as a measure of quality in art"?

Beauty has preoccupied and vexed philosophers, writers, artists, and just about everyone else through the ages, and it is an entity subject to evolution and redefinition. Writing in 1846, Baudelaire stated that "since every age and every people have had their own form of beauty, we inevitably have ours." "Regarding Beauty" purports to "raise rather than answer questions about the nature of beauty." Yet anyone familiar with the machinations of the art world will realize that these particular "questions" have long been answered, and that those answers are propped up by theory and nihilism—the dynamic duo of contemporary art. It's no coincidence that the curators have chosen to concentrate on the last forty years, a time frame distinguished—or do I mean degraded?—by the triumph of the Duchampian aesthetic. "Regarding Beauty" is less a reflection of our culture's "own form of beauty" than a predictable manifestation of one of its more insular subsets—the art establishment.

"All negative art," the painter Agnes Martin stated, "protests the lack of beauty in our lives." There is plenty of "negative art" in "Regarding Beauty," but those who practice it don't protest a lack of beauty; they revel in it. Artists like Kiki Smith or Charles Ray can't imagine, let alone give shape to,

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beauty; they can only reject it. In other words, Ms. Smith and Mr. Ray don't know about art but they do know what they don't like. So what are we left with? Michelangelo Pistoletto's thrift-shop ruminations on the classical world, Sherman's theatrical denigrations of the old masters, Matthew Barney's stylized and unctuous myth-making, Andy Warhol pissing on a copper canvas, and Pablo Picasso, whose inclusion presumably lends blue-chip credibility to this motley collection of objects. Picasso's hasty *Reclining Woman Playing with a Cat* (1964) comes as a relief in this context because, at the very least, it gives the eye something to traverse. With few exceptions, the same can't be said for the rest of the art included in "Regarding Beauty," a species of show that I have come to regard as a "reading exhibition"—one that can't be fathomed without recourse to the explanatory wall labels. And, sure enough, on the day I visited the Hirshhorn, gallery-goers spent more time reading than looking. Of course, with art like this looking isn't the point; there is, in effect, nothing to see.

I attended "Regarding Beauty" on the morning after Thanksgiving—a day, I was warned, when the Washington museums would be bustling with visitors. This proved to be the case and the Hirshhorn was replete with tourists, families with children, curiosity seekers, and, I would imagine, the lone subscriber to *Artforum*. Walking through the the show, I began to wonder what the casual museum-goer—one genuinely interested in art but not versed in art-world fashion—makes of an exhibition such as this. One places one's faith in common sense and the ability of most people to see through the folderol that typifies the "major" art of our time. Yet while "Regarding Beauty" was crowded, the inner hall of the museum—a gallery populated with sculptural masterpieces by Daumier, Degas, Rodin, Rosso, Maillol, Matisse, Lehmbruck, Baizerman, and others—was all but deserted. Hype and hip may bring people into museums, but can it be said that these qualities provide the proper frame of reference to insure that visitors return for less sensational fare? This is one of the troubling questions facing our cultural institutions, one whose repercussions will be felt long after the woozy theorizing of "Regarding Beauty" has met its demise.

—*Mario Naves*

"Naum Gabo: Pioneer of Abstract Sculpture" at PaceWildenstein, New York.
November 4–January 8, 1999

Naum Gabo (1890–1977) possessed an astonishing consistency of vision. Nothing in the design of his complex sculpture *Column* (1975), in which two tall, rectangular intersecting glass panels stand in the center of a number of stainless steel and plexiglass circles, indicates that the artist made it some fifty years after, say, *Construction in Space with Balance on Two Points* (1924–5), a group of intersecting square and rectilinear plexiglass planes held aloft in the center of a bisected plexiglass semicircle. From his first constructions of 1915 until his death, Gabo remained committed to working within the Constructivist aesthetic he helped establish.

He was born Naum Neemia Borisovich Pevsner in 1890, and changed his name to Gabo in 1915 to avoid confusion with his brother Antoine Pevsner. Together they penned the *Realistic Manifesto*, a Constructivist document advocating pure abstract sculpture, but which rejected the Soviet aesthetic program. Unwilling to abandon traditional artistic modes for industrial design or Socialist Realism, the brothers fled the Soviet Union. Gabo lived in Berlin, Paris, and England before permanently settling in the United States in 1946. Two years later the Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition of his and Pevsner's respective work. "Naum Gabo: Pioneer of Abstract Sculpture," PaceWildenstein's thorough and intoxicating exhibit, is Gabo's first in an American gallery since 1953, although the Dallas Museum of Art originated a large retrospective in 1985.

In addition to its eleven sculptures, the

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show includes several graceful drawings, used as studies for sculptural projects, as well as three surprisingly satisfying paintings, in which the sculptor turns his attention to color. *Green Painting (Ireland)* borrows its hues from the Irish countryside and its angular form from the futurisms of Gabo's youth. The pulsing yellows in *Strontium* (1945) inevitably call to mind that era's nuclear experiments, to which Gabo would have been well attuned, having been trained as a scientist and engineer.

Of course, it is the sculpture that holds center stage here. Gabo was among the first artists to employ industrial materials—glass, plastic, and galvanized steel—though he worked on occasion with traditional materials like stone and bronze, too. In his poised, curvilinear constructions, he frequently interrupted, filled, or striated negative space with steel wire, or gave positive form to space with transparent matter such as plexiglass. *Vertical Construction No. 2* (1969–70), a tall, attenuated three-dimensional diamond in stainless steel and spring-wire, illustrates Gabo's abiding interest in vortices, torsion, and the interplay of energy and solidity. The piece stands on a motorized base. In fact, Gabo was a pioneer of kinetic sculpture: his *Kinetic Sculpture (Standing Wave)* (1919–20, Tate Gallery) is arguably the first such work.

The show's oldest piece, *Constructed Head No. 2* (1916), existed only as a small-scale model until 1975, when the artist completed an enormous stainless steel version of this Cubist-inspired head of a woman. One of a series of early heads, the sculpture demonstrates an affection for sharp angles that virtually disappears from Gabo's later curved and biomorphic forms. A similarly cubistic head, this time made of cardboard for a corner niche, *Constructed Head No. 3* (1917), was flattened and smuggled out of the Soviet Union in 1968 by Gabo's brother Alexei. Only recently reconstructed, it wasn't even included in the catalogue raisonné that was assembled for the Dallas Museum retrospective.

Gabo's was an intensely elegant sensibility, devoted to manifesting alary and tensile shapes which, despite his engineering background and purposeful manifestoes, verge on the decorative. PaceWildenstein's show proves the desirability of seeing Naum Gabo's work in galleries more often than once every forty-four years.

—Daniel Kunitz

"Milton Avery: Edge of Abstraction"
at Knoedler & Company, New York.
November 10, 1999–January 22, 2000

"Ripeness is all," Shakespeare reminds us, invoking both age and timeliness. "Milton Avery: Edge of Abstraction," an outstanding show of fifteen of the artist's late works at Knoedler, records the timely encounter of a mature sensibility with the comparatively youthful experiments of the New York School. Avery (1885–1965) was already in his seventies when he began pushing his heretofore representational paintings toward abstraction, giving the lie to the notion that innovation visits only the young. He was born to the first modernist generation (in the same year as Ezra Pound) and was influenced by Cézanne and Matisse. Neither an ideologue nor a joiner of schools, he avoided many of the fashionable artistic movements of his time. Despite his commitment to representational painting, in the Thirties he shunned politically inflected styles such as American Scene painting and Social Realism. Avery's idiosyncratic path led him instead to influence and be influenced by a later generation of modernists, the Abstract Expressionists. He formed relationships with Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb long before they found success as artists.

To Avery, abstraction meant abstracting from nature, paring it down; he eschewed purely non-objective painting. Still, several of the works in this show might easily be taken for complete abstractions were it not for their titles. For instance, without its title *Boathouse by the Sea* (1959) could be seen as a study in color fields—an orange bar at the

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top of the canvas, a light blue rectangle below it, then an oblique triangle of yellow and, below that, a black field. But, given the title, the uppermost areas of color resolve into sky, water, and sand. Studied more closely, the black field at the bottom appears to have two shades, suggesting the eponymous boathouse and its shadow. *Blue Sea, Red Sky* (1958), the painting in this exhibit closest to the "edge of abstraction," invariably recalls Rothko's horizontal bands of color. Again, a red-orange bar stands in for the sky, a blue bar for the sea, and yellow for the sand. Yet Avery didn't use underpainting nearly as much as his friend Rothko. His bands of color don't float within larger fields; they are flatter and have less depth than Rothko's aqueous planes. In all the works in this show, Avery applied thin layers of pigment, leaving the grain of the canvas visible. He used a relatively muted palette that perfectly evokes the diffuse coastal light Avery loved to depict.

By simplifying natural landscapes to color and form, Avery helped continue a tradition—running from Cézanne through notables like Richard Diebenkorn—of exploring the abstract limits of representational painting. While the catalogue essay mentions the "elimination of subject matter," most of the works here do have recognizable content. Avery wanted to reduce or boil down the complexities of the natural world, not eliminate them entirely. In both *Sandspit with Gulls* (1958) and *Sandbar & Sea* (1958), white images of birds define and contextualize the more abstract forms. The starkly gorgeous *Sunlight Reflections* (1957) employs the barest marks—black squiggles for waves among daubs of blue, with white and yellow dapples running vertically down the center of the canvas—to describe sunlight reflecting on the sea. That process of reduction can be discerned in Alex Katz's recent large-scale waterscapes and images of trees, which clearly show that Katz was influenced by Avery. In addition to the paintings, Knoedler includes a number of studies in oil, crayon, gouache, watercolor, and flat black on paper, which hew closely to the techniques and imagery of the paintings.

These are splendid works, the ripe fruit of a life spent painting, and made sweet by the freshness Avery brought to the endeavor even in his later years.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

God and the Victorians *by Roger Kimball*
Robert Conquest's "Century" *by David Pryce-Jones*
Robert Musil's diaries *by Eric Ormsby*
Hazlitt & Wordsworth *by Martin Greenberg*
Penelope Fitzgerald *by Tess Lewis*
Naipaul père & fils *by Joseph Epstein*

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Music

Small encomia

by Jay Nordlinger

Ours is hardly a golden age for pianists. In fact, it is more like tin. Murray Perahia is a great pianist—with all the tools, and all the wit—but he is practically alone. The situation is better for conductors, but only slightly. Violinists, happy to say, are in decent supply. And for singers, we are in a positively glorious age—one that will be recognized as such after it has safely, and lamentably, passed.

Impoverished as we are in pianists, there are some interesting and creditable ones on the scene. At Carnegie Hall recently, three of them appeared within two weeks: Mitsuko Uchida, a Japanese pianist, long resident in Europe, who is known particularly for her Mozart; Emanuel Ax, an American, born in Poland, who is admired for his Chopin and chamber playing; and Evgeny Kissin, a former child prodigy, now twenty-nine, from Russia, who is the object of rapture and delirium everywhere.[1] Many people see him as the successor to Rachmaninoff, Horowitz, Richter, Gilels—all of the giants who built the hair-raising Russian tradition.

Mitsuko Uchida, decidedly, is not of this tradition; she is a clean, careful, and modest pianist. Uchida offered an unusual program in New York, or rather, she presented it in an unusual order: a Chopin sonata, Webern, Mozart, and, to conclude, a late Schubert sonata.

Her Chopin was the B-flat minor, the sonata that includes the famous funeral march. She did well enough with the piece, but it illustrated a curious fact about her: she does not have much technique. The reason this is curious is that pianists today, whatever their musical limitations, are supposed to have loads of technique. In the old days, we often hear, technique might have been faulty, but musicianship—in particular, musical individuality—abounded. Today, continues this line, everyone has ample technique—that is taken for granted—but musicianship is wanting.

Uchida, however, has a severely limited technique, meaning that she can barely handle much of the mainstream repertory. The Chopin sonata was all but beyond her. She is exceptionally tight in the arms, which restricts her movement and deprives her of fluidity. She appears to sit too close to the keyboard, and her shoulders are hunched. Her entire piano-playing apparatus seems cramped. To be sure, she usually manages to get through difficult passages, but not without awkwardness and strain.

Her main problem in the first movement of the Chopin lay in the octaves: she could not coax a singing line out of them. It is easier, of course, to produce such a line with single notes, but Chopin demands that it be

1 Mitsuko Uchida appeared at Carnegie Hall, New York, on November 22, 1999. Evgeny Kissin appeared on December 4. Emanuel Ax appeared on December 6.

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done with octaves as well. Uchida did not play those octaves *into* the keys, but rather *on top* of them, resulting in a harsh and brittle tone.

The Scherzo of the sonata, she really lacked the technique to play. She took it rather slowly, as she was wise to do, but she nonetheless missed too many notes and failed to convey those lively qualities that make the movement, after all, a scherzo.

Her approach to the funeral march was awfully strange: she pounced on every high B-flat, creating far too jarring a contrast with the rest of the melodic line. Uchida meant the movement to be stark and martial—nothing wrong with that—but it came off instead as confused. In the lyrical D-flat-major section, however, she demonstrated a superb—really a superb—pianissimo. She was astonishingly quiet, but every note was distinct. The concluding Presto movement—a ghost-like toccata—was a bit overpedaled, mushier than in the most impressive performances, but acceptable.

Anton Webern published only one mature work for piano: the *Variations*, Op. 27. Uchida has a fondness for the Austrian serial school—she often programs Schoenberg, too—and she makes for it a worthy champion. In the *Variations*, she was spare and haunting, managing the crosshand work with particular finesse. This was wonderfully delicate playing—one is tempted to say, "like Japanese porcelain," but that would seem ethnically pointed. The effectiveness of this work is heavily dependent on rhythm, and here Uchida was in steady control.

After the Webern, an odd thing occurred: Uchida did not leave the bench, nor did she rise to acknowledge applause. Rather, she remained seated and continued with the Mozart *Adagio* in B minor, K. 540. If she was trying to make a musical point—and she probably was—it was clear only to her.

Uchida obviously loves the *Adagio*, and she played it with touching devotion. Her reputation as a Mozartean is well earned. If she had a fault, though, it was her unwillingness to let the music speak for itself. This is, after all, a fairly simple (pianistic) song, not the *Requiem*. She made too much of a show of it, as if to say, "See what a profound little work this adagio is?" Nevertheless, there was that appealing cleanness about her playing, and the B major at the end was radiant.

In the closing Schubert sonata, the D major, D. 850, one of Uchida's principal defects was glaring: an absence of true dynamic range. She seems to specialize in two things: sublime pianissimos and banging. She is apparently incapable of generating a big sound without banging, and this is an ugliness that undermines the other musical effects she has achieved. One wonders, at times, whether she can hear herself. Still, this performance had its strengths. Uchida lavished tenderness on the Con moto movement, and she captured nicely the *gemütlich* nature of the rondo. When Uchida has the luxury of relatively undemanding music, her listeners can relax—and she is a joy.

Emanuel Ax is very much like Uchida: a solid pianist, largely unobjectionable, but often frustrating, missing the mark of greatness. The knock on Ax has always been: What is distinctive about him? When we turn on the radio, how can we tell it is he? What does he have to offer us musically? Legitimate questions all—but there are worse things to be, in our current circumstances, than a correct, inoffensive, and occasionally compelling pianist.

Ax began his New York recital with the Haydn Sonata in A-flat, Hob. XVI: 46. He immediately exhibited a pleasing, unforced tone. His is a rich and mellow sound, velvety even, though it sometimes tends toward muddle. Ax's technique (in contrast to Uchida's) is relaxed and supple. The Allegro was neatly ornamented, and the Adagio was astoundingly beautiful—the pianist, to his credit, got out of its way, allowing it to breathe, rather than trying to impose on it a beauty that it already owns. The Rondo could have been more finely etched—a brighter tone and crisper articu-

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lation would have been welcome—but it had the merit of being spirited.

After the Haydn, something unusual took place (as in the Uchida recital): Out walked a Carnegie Hall employee to place a music rack on the piano, and over walked Ax to a microphone at stage right (we had wondered what that instrument was for). Ax then delivered a little lecture on the next piece, John Corigliano's *Fantasia on an Ostinato*. The pianist, in an engaging and amiable style, explained that the piece was based on the funeral march of Beethoven's A-major symphony—a fact that would become perfectly plain once he sat down to play.

Ax is a faithful friend to contemporary music, but Corigliano, who was present, should have been furious. The notion that a modern work, particularly one as straightforward as Corigliano's, cannot be played without prior explanation is insulting. If Ax had wanted to do the composer a favor, he might have memorized the piece, as he had memorized the rest of the program.

The remainder of the first half of the program was devoted to Debussy: the three pieces of *Estampes* and *L'Isle joyeuse*, a glory of Impressionism. In *Pagodes*, the first of the *Estampes*, Ax was more a Romantic than an Impressionist, and he failed to conjure that lovely haze that should fall over these pieces. *Soirée dans Grenade* was somewhat better, endowed with Spanish majesty. *Jardins sous la pluie* was dreadful—slow and plodding rather than fleet and entrancing.

As for *L'Isle*, it too was a mess. Not only did Ax seem technically unprepared for it, he missed the structure of the thing. His performance had no lilt to it, no magic, and the rhapsodic climax was no climax at all. The piece is next to impossible to make dull, but Ax, somehow, managed the feat.

His problems continued with Chopin's *Berceuse*, which opened the second half of the recital. The trick here is to keep the lullaby going while running the busy work of the right hand around it. With Ax, however, we heard only the busy work, obtrusive and clumsy; the *berceuse*, or lullaby, was lost.

More successful, though—in fact, a total success—was Chopin's Sonata in B minor (the one that follows the sonata that Uchida played). Ax's reading of it was utterly sympathetic, and he showed noble restraint throughout. The Largo, truly, was exquisite. Ax did not quite have the technical wherewithal to bring off the Presto in lionlike fashion, but it mattered little—this was great Chopin playing, and Ax deserved his lusty bravos.

Now to Evgeny Kissin, a troublesome case. Kissin was undoubtedly—this is a large claim, but true—the outstanding child prodigy of the piano in the twentieth century. He made the world gasp when he was twelve, playing the two Chopin concertos and three encores in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. That was March 27, 1984. He was a sweet-looking, curly-headed boy in a Red Pioneers scarf, the hope of Soviet pianism. His Chopin was startlingly mature: musically astute and technically commanding. At thirteen, he made a recording of the Prokofiev Concerto No. 3: dazzling. Before he was out of his teens, he was performing and mowing down the most daunting music in the repertory, such as the Transcendental Etudes of Liszt. He was a *Wunderkind* if there ever was one. The only question was, when the *Kind* grew up, would the *Wunder* remain?

It has, to a degree; but Kissin is a maddeningly inconsistent pianist. He can play like a marvel, and he can play like a fool. His recording of the B-flat concerto of Beethoven, with James Levine, is all but unlistenable, so percussive and unfeeling is Kissin's playing. This is punishment of the keyboard, not music-making. At a recital in Washington a year and a half ago, Kissin was so vulgar and histrionic as to verge on the anti-musical. His playing of Beethoven's late A-major sonata was a travesty, almost unrecognizable as Beethoven. His Brahms Intermezzos were about 90 percent Kissin, only 10 percent Brahms. He showed himself to be willful, egocentric, and crude. If a pianist arrantly ignores the wishes of the composer (as Horowitz frequently did), he

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had better have the musical potency to pull it off (as, again, Horowitz did).

Kissin, it is a relief to report, was infinitely better in New York than in Washington. He began with Rachmaninoff's *Etudes-tableaux*, Op. 39. If these pieces are seldom heard, it is because few pianists have the ability to execute them. Kissin has it, in spades. He is smart to perform this music: he can, therefore he should. The etudes, swimming in bravura, were made for him —or rather, they were made for Rachmaninoff, who composed chiefly to gave himself something suitable to play.

It would seem churlish to criticize a pianist so gifted, invigorating, and adored, but Kissin falls short of full satisfaction, even in the Russian repertory. The etudes require, in addition to a monster technique, the attention of a colorist. Kissin is, unfortunately, a bit of a thumper. He could not draw out the ethereal sound when needed, in the manner of—to name a few—Hofmann, Godowsky, Horowitz, Gilels, and, of course, the composer himself. Nor did the music in Kissin's hands shimmer and gleam. Kissin, for all of his wizardry, is essentially an earthbound pianist, who rarely floats or dances or soars. Everything he touched in New York was big-conceived; there was a harmful heaviness to his playing. The B-minor etude, for example, should be elfin; instead, it wore lead shoes. So too the A-minor, which lacked impishness and bite. In the famous E-flat-minor etude—a storm of a piece—Kissin was sloppy and cloddish. Moreover, his trills were poor, as they have always been, a puzzling fact for a pianist so technically accomplished.

And here is a heretical observation: Kissin, who would seem the most exciting and swashbuckling of pianists, can be . . . boring. The C-minor etude is a piece of almost unbearable tension and drama; but in Kissin's conception, it was limp and unremarkable. For the D-major etude, Kissin had all the speed and power necessary, but what was missing—this is a cavil, but not insignificant—was that sheen, a brilliance, the almost blinding quality of (to say it once more, for this comparison is inevitable) Horowitz.

After intermission, Kissin presented Scriabin's Sonata No. 3, and here he was as convincing and musical as he has ever been. A finer account of this work can scarcely be imagined; every measure was intelligently judged. Then came a transcription of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*—which was rather less fine. It suffered from wrongly accented notes and was altogether more lumpy than limpid. This is a piece that a pianist, obviously, must sing; otherwise, it should be left to its rightful owners, the sopranos. Last on the printed program was Balakirev's wild and popular *Islamey*, a great Russian romp, an anthem of a kind. In it, Kissin was thoroughly idiomatic, and he made one's hair stand on end—just as the doctor ordered.

Kissin is—the world is correct—a pianist of staggering talents, even if his musical choices sometimes appall. If he can shed some of his more corrosive habits, he will fulfill all of the promise of his heroic teens. And if he cannot, he will still be a pianist worth hearing—as will, for that matter, Mitsuko Uchida and Emanuel Ax. It is a pity, though, that "worth hearing" is about as high an encomium as one can bestow, in this, a dreary age for the piano.

Opera note

A View from the Bridge, by William Bolcom, at the Lyric Opera of Chicago.
October 9–November 5, 1999

The second most eagerly anticipated operatic event of 1999—the first being John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*, which opened at the Met in December—took place October 28 in Chicago when the Lyric Opera presented the premiere of William Bolcom's *A View From the Bridge*. Interest in the new opera, based upon Arthur Miller's 1955 play, was stoked by lavish pre-publicity, including a series in *The New York Times* which chronicled the development of the

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work from composition to dress rehearsal to opening night.

Miller's drama concerns the longshoreman Eddie Carbone from Brooklyn, and his complex relationship with his adopted niece, Catherine. When Eddie agrees to take two Sicilian cousins of his wife Beatrice into their household, the darkly conflicted side of his overprotective attitude toward the seventeen-year-old Catherine is unveiled. Her growing affection for the blond cousin Rodolpho arouses Eddie's jealousy, and, driven to distraction, he turns the men in to the immigration authorities. As a result, Eddie is shunned by the neighborhood. When Marco, the other brother, is released from prison, he confronts him and in their struggle, Eddie is fatally impaled on his own knife, a symbolic end for a decent man undone by his passions and inability to confront his interior desires.

A View From the Bridge was adapted by longtime Bolcom lyricist Arnold Weinstein, with the assistance of the playwright himself. It is scrupulously faithful to the original drama. Indeed, the "big block emotions" (in Miller's words) of the play cry out for operatic treatment and Bolcom's goal of creating "grand opera Brooklynized" in this work is to a large extent successfully realized.

Taking place almost exactly a year after the Lyric's rapturously received premiere of the revised version of Marvin David Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the company was clearly hoping that lightning would strike twice. As with the other new operas it has presented, the Lyric gave *Bridge* a first-class mounting. The set and costume designer Santo Loquasto's raked stage presented the claustrophobic Carbone living room, dwarfed by irregularly angled steel girders and the atmospheric expanse of the Brooklyn Bridge. Most evocative were the huge projections by Wendall K. Harrington of stark black and white photographs of contemporaneous New York scenes from laundry-strewn Brooklyn tenements to Coney Island. The slow scrolling of the massive photos, an aptly disorienting effect, complemented the disordered psychology of Eddie Carbone.

William Bolcom has always been an eclectic musical stylist, and such was certainly the case here. Most of the music is characterized by a forward-moving astringent rhythmic impetus, which often breaks out into popular musical forms, artfully used without ever veering wholly towards pop. As in the original play, "Paper Doll" makes an appearance here, metamorphosed into a brief lush version sung by the excitable Rodolpho. Yet despite the populist inspiration and outlines of the score, most of Bolcom's music remains stubbornly unmemorable. The only exception is Rodolpho's love song to his new city, "The Lights of New York." With simple, poetic words, this urban hymn has big-hit potential, complete with a tenorial high C. It is likely to be instant boilerplate for every up-and-coming American tenor's debut disc for the next twenty years.

Unfortunately, there is nothing else remotely on the same level. Marco's character is given an aria late in the opera, "A ship called Hunger," in which he rounds out his character more than the somewhat undeveloped and clichéd ominous Sicilian of the play. There are also numerous choruses, including a 1950s-style doo-wop bit for the longshoremen. As Miller wrote in an introduction to the published play: "The mind of Eddie Carbone is not comprehensible apart from its relation to his neighborhood, his fellow workers, his social situation." The attorney and quasi-narrator Alfieri—a creaky and somewhat hoary plot device in the play, works more effectively here as a leader of the chorus, enlarging upon the Brooklyn milieu and the neighborhood's reactions to Eddie's self-destructive jealousy.

While Bolcom's music wraps well around the story, there are moments when the action sags and the music slows into a kind of faceless accompaniment. Too often Bolcom's score is a string of disconnected bits of uneven inspiration strung together. After a while, the heavy gestures and short frag-

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mented phrases begin to sound merely aggressive, unvaried, over-scored. There are also some items that should be jettisoned, especially having Mike, one of Eddie's buddies, say nothing but "Yeah" for the duration of the opera, a silly gimmick which wears out its welcome after the third iteration.

But most problematic of all is that the best music is given to the secondary characters. Eddie, especially, as the main character cries out for a tortured solo scene, à la Rigoletto or Otello (or, at the very least, Peter Grimes), near the end wherein he rages at all the destruction he has caused, perhaps with some momentary reflection or self-questioning. If nothing else, Bolcom definitely needs to beef up the role musically in any revisions. It's a shame that such a fascinating character was not as fully exploited as it might have been, for Kim Josephson seems born to play the role of Eddie Carbone. His dry and gritty baritone and his hangdog working-man's visage and physiognomy were perfect for the rough-edged character. Josephson brought the stubborn brutish Eddie absolutely to life, even managing to find some redeeming decency in this haunted man and making his death a tragic experience.

Catherine Malfitano has grown into something close to an institution in Chicago opera, but the part of Eddie's long-suffering wife Beatrice is an ungrateful one; it offers few interesting moments apart from one brief scene with Catherine. And though Malfitano is one of the great actresses in opera today, the fact that her voice is wearing thin at the top and acquiring a hard strident edge cannot be avoided.

As Catherine, Juliana Rambaldi made an indifferent impression. The statuesque soprano seemed miscast as a girlish seventeen-year old and her low-lying voice was ill-suited to Bolcom's high tessitura. The tenor Gregory Turay made a strong house debut as Rodolpho, decidedly un-Italian, but youthful and engaging. Bass-baritone Mark McCrory was well cast as the menacing Marco, his black-hued timbre superbly suited to his dark aria "A ship called Hunger." As the lawyer Alfieri, Timothy Nolen's firmly focused, authoritative baritone presented some of the finest singing of the production.

Frank Galati's direction served up his usual deft and imaginative touches, with a few missteps. The fight scenes were stiff and stagy, and having Rodolpho ironing shirts was a silly idea, which, along with his swooning when the drunken Eddie roughly kisses him to prove to Catherine that the young man is "not right," seems to confirm Eddie's paranoid notions. Some of the blocking of the chorus standing stage right and singing in admonition, "Eddie, Eddie Carbone, what have you done," etc., is didactic and heavy-handed, and could stand some trimming as well.

As Bruce Weber's *New York Times* articles showed, Dennis Russell Davies was really the production's midwife more than anyone, and the conductor's patient work and incisive and understanding musical direction deserve a large share of the credit for the evening's success. William Bolcom's *A View From the Bridge* is a solid and admirable effort, and with judicious revisions and expansion could yet be a great work, able to make its way into the standard repertory. Time and the always crucial second production will tell.

—Lawrence A. Johnson

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The media

Superior soap opera

by James Bowman

CHRISTOPHER: I'm workin' my ass off on this movie script. You know how many pages I got? Nineteen.
PAULIE: Is that a lot or a little?
CHRISTOPHER: Books say a movie's supposed to be about 120 pages.
PAULIE: [whistles softly].
CHRISTOPHER: With this f***in' computer, I thought it would do a lot of it.
PAULIE [menacingly]: If you're bein' frank about the business, kid—
CHRISTOPHER: I would never do that. It's only "Suggested by."
PAULIE: That writer—with the bullfights? He blew his own f***in' head off.
CHRISTOPHER: I bought a script-writin' program and everything.
PAULIE: My advice? Put that thing down a while. We go get our joints copped and tomorrow the words will come blowin' out your ass.
—*The Sopranos*, episode VIII

Television is the great postmodern medium. In "The Sopranos," television has at last got a great postmodern drama worthy of it. Or at least those statements may be regarded as true except insofar as they are self-contradictions, "greatness" being what postmodernism consciously and inevitably seeks to undermine. Optimistic by nature, however, I have always held that not even the archness, the derivativeness, the fundamental unseriousness of postmodern art can prevent that art from having, like any other, its master practitioners. And like other craftsmen—these are something more than glass-blowers and something less than furniture designers—they are worthy of our (perhaps qualified) admiration.

At any rate, if there are any masters of the craft, there can be no doubt that the creative team responsible for "The Sopranos," especially the executive producer, David Chase, billed as the series' "creator," must be among them. The series, which first ran on HBO a year ago, is being shown again in December and January, and later this month will begin a second series on the same network. I admit to having been a skeptic at first. How many times have I heard some new prime-time series touted for its power and artistry—"NYPD Blue" and "ER" come immediately to mind—only to find that it is virtually indistinguishable from everything else on TV. That homogenization is, in fact, the principal effect of putting anything on television, where all programming, even that which began as a serious play or an opera, instantly becomes generic entertainment unless it is so remarkable for wit, originality, and intelligence that it can break free of the limitations of the medium. "The Sopranos" not only does this, but it also exploits those limitations for its own purposes.

In the passage quoted above, for instance, two gangsters (played by Michael Imperioli and Tony Sirico) discuss the ambition of one of them, the younger, to be a screen-

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writer. Just before this scene, the camera has given us a glimpse of the quality of Christopher's nineteen completed pages in the two lines of dialogue he has most recently committed to the page. They read as follows:

> BEAUTIFUL GIRL: "Thank you!!!!"
> CHIP: "I must be loyle to my capo."

Here we have a cheesy gangster drama about a cheesy gangster whose ambition it is to write cheesy gangster dramas. But the classically postmodern, self-referential quality of the situation is for once not merely gratuitous, designed mainly to show off the cleverness of the author. Christopher still sees himself as a man of honor ("I would never do that"), but without quite realizing it he has already thrown in his lot with honor's great and so-far victorious rival for the allegiance of the new generation: celebrity. He doesn't really want to write. He scarcely knows what writing is ("I thought the computer would do most of it"), but he knows that *to be a writer* is also a way of being a celebrity. A friend in Hollywood has told him that he might even play himself in the movie of his life. He goes on to explain to Paulie that the scriptwriting book he has bought says that "every character has an arc. . . . Like, everybody starts out somewheres, then they do somethin', or somethin' gets done to them. It changes their life. That's called their arc. Where's *my* arc?" Young Christopher's fumbling attempts to find his own life's "arc" are for him the same thing as his fumbling attempts to create one for his fictional character (even our glimpse of the name "Chip" suggests its autobiographical nature). The show's self-consciousness here becomes a metaphor for Christopher's—and for that which is, in fact, throughout the series, preventing all these gangsters' lives from assuming the arc which traditional fictions such as *The Godfather* (constantly alluded to throughout the series by Christopher and others) have led them to expect.

It is therefore wonderfully witty to have Christopher looking to compensate for his dissatisfactions with life as a gangster by becoming a celebrity writer. Even the dimmest of the Soprano associates, Paulie Walnuts (as he is known to his intimates), understands and sympathizes with this ambition when he alludes to Hemingway, the prototype of the self-conscious "writer" and the writer as celebrity—the guy who shows us how to be a writer in the same way that Don Corleone shows us how to be a gangster. But wait a minute! Hemingway blew his head off! He knew he was what we know as a "writer" in a way that Don Corleone didn't know he was what we know as a gangster. And self-consciousness became a curse for him—just as it is becoming a curse for Christopher and his "capo," Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini). For Tony is seeing a psychiatrist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), because he has been having anxiety attacks.

There are a certain number of facile jokes about this—as there were in last winter's film *Analyze This*, which was based on the same premise—not only where tough Tony easily lapses into psychobabble about his "self-esteem," but also where Christopher engages in *Godfather*-type histrionics: "This ain't negotiation time," he says at one point when he thinks there is about to be a gang "war" with another branch of the family. "This is *Scarface*, final scene, f***in' bazookas under each arm: 'Say hello to my little friend'"—to which one of his fellow thugs mutters: "Always with the scenarios." But the series makes it clear that both Christopher's movie-madness and Tony's therapy fit into a larger cultural process that is undermining traditional gangsterism. Both are natural parts of the suburban, upper middle-class "lifestyle" (as the wiseguys don't quite learn to call it) that they aspire to.

The contrasts between the now-cinematic character of old-fashioned mob activities and the mundane life of a prosperous north Jersey suburb in the 1990s are not cheap jokes. In a brilliant scene in the first episode, Tony's wife, Carmella (Edie Falco), is talk-

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ing to a priest late one night when Tony is not at home (the subject is which of the *Godfather* movies was best) when a noise outside sounds like a window being jimmied. In a flash she produces, seemingly from nowhere, an assault rifle and charges out onto the patio, pointing the gun at —her daughter, Meadow (Jamie Lynn Sigler), who has snuck out and who is trying to get back into her room. Her little brother, Anthony Jr. (Robert Iler), has locked the window so she will get caught. Still brandishing the deadly weapon, Carmella lashes out angrily: Meadow, whose name is redolent of a long outdated middle-class hippiedom, is not only grounded, she says, she's not to be allowed to make a promised trip to Aspen. "Yes!" says Tony Jr.

It is a very funny moment, but there is also a serious side to it. Is not, after all, Meadow's casual insubordination and her addiction to the clichés of teen culture in protesting against the unfairness of her sentence as much a threat to the family business as any intruder could have been? At the same time, she has all the more reason for her look of teenage disgust when her mother tells her that "you can't just lie and cheat and break the rules you don't like." Carmella is an ordinary suburban wife, her kids ordinary suburban kids, save for the fact that what sustains them and occasionally makes them anxious is Tony's job in the mob—which he euphemistically describes as "waste management consultant." Meanwhile, as great as any business anxiety to Tony is that of how he is to keep the truth from the kids, who find his picture on a crime site on the Internet. "It's hard to raise kids in an information age," says Paulie Walnuts.

Nor are the neighbors, as well acquainted with cinematic gangsterdom as Tony's gang, inclined to see him as a pariah. If anything, they get a little thrill from their proximity to the romance of the mafia. Next door, Dr. Bruce Cusamano, who referred Tony to Dr. Melfi, has a dinner party at which he asks: "Being a gangster, what does it mean anyway? . . . Buggin'? Bribes? I don't know. Sometimes I think the only thing separating American business from the mobs is f***in' whackin' somebody." Later some of the guys invite Tony for a round of golf at the country club. One says: "Tony, let me ask you a question. Now if I'm steppin' on toes tell me. How real was *The Godfather*?" Tony later tells the psychiatrist that he felt humiliated by being made a spectacle of.

In what is perhaps the best of the thirteen episodes to date, Tony takes his daughter to look at colleges in New England. On the road he tries to expose just a little of the reality of his life to her in therapy-speak: "Some of my money comes from illegal gambling and whatnot. How does that make you feel?"

> "At least you don't keep denying it, like mom. The kids in school think it's actually kind of neat."
>
> "They seen *The Godfather*, right?"
>
> "Not really. *Casino* they like. Sharon Stone, 70s clothes, pills."

Tony's claim to be really no different from any other father on their prosperous block is met with skepticism. "I don't think the Cusamano kids ever found $50,000 in Krugerrands and a .45 pistol while looking for Easter eggs," she says. "How did you get so cynical?" Tony asks her.

While on the college trip, Tony catches sight of Fabian Petrulio (Tony Ray Rossi), a former mob rat now in the federal witness protection program in Maine, and at once begins plotting to kill him while Meadow is having an interview at Colby College. The juxtaposition between middle-class ordinariness and the mob's implacable enforcement of *omertà* is reinforced by the fact that, on separate occasions, both Tony and his prospective victim hesitate to kill each other on account of the presence of the other's child. Nor is the juxtaposition lost on Tony himself. At the end of the episode we see him contemplating a plaque at Bowdoin on which are inscribed the words of Hawthorne: "No man can wear one face to him-

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self and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true." A passing student notes: "He's our most famous alumnus."

Thus Tony's therapy is at one level an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable—a life devoted to honor with a life devoted to feeling good. Tony himself points this out to the therapist at their first meeting, when he is at his most skeptical. "Nowadays, everybody's got to go to shrinks and counselors and go on Sally Jesse Raphael to talk about their problem. What ever happened to," he pauses, "Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type. That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do." Growing more and more passionate, Tony continues: "See what they don't know was, once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelings, that they wouldn't be able to shut him up, and then it's dysfunction this, dysfunction that. . . ."

Whereupon the shrink brings him back to a kind of reality by noting wryly: "You have strong feelings about this." It is a reminder that, although he has a detached and theoretical admiration for Gary Cooper, as he does for his tough-guy forebears in the business, he is himself inextricably involved in the world of feelings. Not only does the very normality he prizes for the wife and kids involve him in it, but at another level he himself sees therapy as simply one of the accoutrements of the suburban existence into which he and the family otherwise fit so naturally. Later we learn that even Paulie has been to a shrink. "I had some issues," he says with rather less embarrassment than Tony has shown. "Enough said. I learned some coping skills." The comedy of this moment is superficially similar to but in its context cuts much deeper than that in *Analyze This*.

That is, it is wryer and more pregnant with the sense of a moral awakening, albeit one which comes only to those who seek, not in vain, for a new accommodation with the moral standards of the community. That seems a small price to pay for the dawning of self-consciousness, whether for good (Tony and the boys begin to acquire a conscience) or ill (their conscience is imperfectly distinguished from the mere narcissism of so much of the therapeutic experience). When Meadow's high school soccer coach is found to have been sleeping with one of her teammates, Tony doesn't hesitate to order the coach "whacked." Later, he allows himself to be talked out of this sanction even though, as he bitterly complains to Dr. Melfi, the man will probably escape all punishment by managing, with the help of the therapy industry, to portray *himself* as a victim. Yet the episode ends with Tony, full of drink and Prozac, bragging: "Carmella. I didn't hurt nobody."

A drama about the birth of self-consciousness is ideally suited to television, because what makes television postmodern is its own self-consciousness. It is possible to be in a movie or on a stage without (as it were) knowing that you are in a movie or on a stage. The actors' self-consciousness as actors is not built in to the experience of watching a movie or a play—though of course more and more movies and plays are deliberately breaking through the illusion of reality that our inherited expectations half-create for them. But television is not set apart like movies and plays, meant to be watched in a darkened room in a place you have to travel to get to. It is experienced in the midst of daily domestic life. It is common as dirty dishes.

Therefore, people who are on television are from the start unprotected by the illusion of reality that their brethren of the stage and the silver screen can either take or leave alone. They cannot get away with pretending they don't know they're on television. Usually, this self-consciousness leads only to coyness: the smirk on the face of Gary Shandling or Jerry Seinfeld or David Letterman, all of whom seem to expect to be congratulated and applauded for refusing to pretend that they don't know they're on television. It's old hat, guys. We know you know. We don't really care as we did when TV was younger and we still expected it to be like the movies only in our homes. The wit-

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ticism of Letterman's flipping his cue cards through the fake window behind the set to the sound of breaking glass is now nearly twenty years old, yet he continues to do it every show.

Television is like everyday life even in this: there's no help for the necessity of continuing to do the same things over and over again. That is why, too, all television programming aspires to the condition of soap opera and (naturally enough) the best TV is, like "The Sopranos," also the best soap opera. Television adaptations of the classics always work or don't work depending on how close their originals are to soap opera. The simpler Jane Austen and Thackeray can do very well on the small screen—as we saw in the excellent *Vanity Fair*, adapted for the BBC by Andrew Davies, that appeared on A&E in October. Dickens and George Eliot, though, tend to make poor television. They are more heavy-duty moralists, concerned with what Christopher would call the "arc" of their characters' lives.

In soap opera, as opposed to real drama, it's not so much an "arc" as a straight line. This is what Christopher is complaining about, postmodern fashion, in episode eight. There is no *peripeteia* for these characters, no moment at which everything changes, because we know they will all be back tomorrow or next week for more of the same. We can be pretty sure from the time we meet Tony in episode one that he will still have to be around in episode thirteen, so when Fabian Petrulio has him in his sights in episode five, or Uncle Junior (Dominic Chianese) puts a contract out on him in episode eleven, we aren't too worried. Even when characters do not come back next week, so much of their lives do that it is as if they were still with us. It is the repetition which enforces the banality of domesticity on the passions and casualties that might otherwise take on the meaning and importance of more traditional art forms.

But "The Sopranos" is very superior soap opera indeed. It is soap opera in the mock heroic vein. It depends on our knowledge of a heroic literary background—in this case, the background is made up of *The Godfather* and other gangster movies that celebrate the culture of honor of an earlier time even where they pretend to condemn it. When Christopher murders a Czech competitor in the garbage business, bigger than life-sized posters of Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson glower down on the act. Tony's ideal of American manhood is Gary Cooper. The main characters here know their own littleness and feel alternately humbled by it ("Those people went through World War Two," says Tony admiringly of his mother and his uncle) and furious at the demands of greatness on those lucky enough to inhabit the consumer heaven of 1990s America.

Tony's mother, by the way, brilliantly played by Nancy Marchand, is one of the great soap-opera villains of all time, like J. R. Ewing or Alexis Carrington, but all her aggression is of the passive variety. Along with the garbage business and an Italian sense of family loyalty, Tony inherited from the World War Two generation a load of guilt and an awestruck appreciation of his mother's power which turns out to be the real reason he is in therapy. In a moment of exasperation, he says to her: "You know, everybody thought dad was the ruthless one, but I gotta hand it to you: if you had been born after those feminists, you would have been the real gangster."

"I don't know what you're talking about," says ma. Later, with the same words, she incites his uncle to kill him as punishment for putting her into a nursing home—or "retirement community" as Tony insists on calling it. "It's more," he tells her, "like a luxury hotel at Cap d'Antibes."

"Who's he?," asks ma.

"A Captain who owns luxury hotels or somethin'," says Tony. "I don't know."

If a real Tony had heard of Cap d'Antibes, we must suppose he would have known what it was. But if this is rather a postmodern joke, it is, like "The Sopranos" itself, a very good one.

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Books

Howard's rendering

by Martin Greenberg

If *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1859) is not the greatest work in that great body of literature which is the French realistic novel of the nineteenth century—and more than one good critic has thought it so—it is surely the most brilliant. According to Erich Auerbach, Stendhal founded modern literary realism, which portrayed the nineteenth-century world in light of a new historical awareness of an all-embracing political, social, and economic reality. But the *Charterhouse* also goes back to the sixteenth century in finding the germ of its story of love (love inflected marvelously in a variety of ways) and intrigue in an old Italian manuscript. It goes back to the eighteenth century, too, in its principality of Parma, an anachronistic parochial autocracy moldering stupidly in the nineteenth-century present. Its stupidities, which Stendhal treats with an urbane, amused irony that nevertheless has lively indignation behind it, are the vanity and cruelty and crimes of the petty kingdom's ruler; the venality and servility of officials; the police-mind and the newspeak language of government; the emptiness of political parties; and the lying on all sides. It needs little effort on the reader's part to recognize the twentieth as well as the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries in the novel's picture of things. An outsider in his own time as in everything, Stendhal could roam freely in that time dimension of which he was so conscious.

He went back to another time, too, in his style of writing and the character of his work. His, Valéry wrote, is "the kind of abstract and impassioned literature, sparer, lighter than any other, which is characteristic of France"—characteristic of France more especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like *The Red and the Black* (1830), the *Charterhouse* is a serious comedy that ends in tragedy. But the tone, the wonderful Stendhal tone, is always light, gaiety transfiguring all that cynicism, that fixed belief he had, as Valéry said, in universal falsehood —although transfiguring it into what exactly has always been hard to say. Stendahl's prose style is spare, in the French classical tradition, but so very spare, often indeed curt, that it goes beyond tradition, as his work as a whole goes beyond tradition. In his *Life of Henry Brulard* he regretted having written *The Red and the Black* "in too clipped a style." He had done so, foolishly, in reaction against "the rhythmic and pretentious phrases" of Chateaubriand and others; but who would pay attention to them in twenty years' time, whereas with his novels he was entered in a lottery the great prize of which was "to be read in 1935"—i.e., undying fame.

Stendhal's plain style is easy to read—easy to read in an elementary sense; the Stendhal tone runs up and down a scale of feeling and thought which isn't easy to read at all. Nor is it not easy to translate, simplicity notoriously being in translation, as in other things, so very difficult to achieve. Of course

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translating great literature, and even literature not so great, is always difficult; it's a mug's game, as a friend once remarked, because you always lose. Still, there are degrees of defeat. The first translation of the *Charterhouse* that I read, years ago, was by C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, a fine writer. In the 1950s, Penguin published M. R. B. Shaw's somewhat plainer version, which (as well as correcting mistakes) I thought suited the original better. After a long lapse, the end-of-century wave of retranslation has floated the novel up to the surface again: in 1997 the Oxford World's Classics published Margaret Mauldon's translation, and now the Modern Library Richard Howard's.[1] One has learned to be suspicious of publishers' motives in offering retranslations. Nevertheless new times need new versions, or anyhow that's what we believe. *The Charterhouse of Parma* keeps so fresh, by all means let us have a fresh translation, if it's fresh. No easy job. The Beylean freshness has never been caught, except spottily, in translations of the novels.[2] I think Jean Stewart and B. C. J. G. Knight catch it in their 1958 rendering of *The Life of Henry Brulard*; maybe the fact that the *Brulard* is recollections and observations spontaneously jotted down made it easier.

Howard's version doesn't catch the freshness any more than earlier ones, I am afraid. It needed only a few pages to see that. But first a more commonplace consideration, its carelessness—for it is shockingly careless at an elementary level, the level of simple sense. On page 26, for example, Fabrizio tells the Countess Pietranera that he is leaving to join the army of his hero Napoleon. The preceding paragraph has informed the reader that the time is six in the morning. "Tonight at Menaggio," Fabrizio says, "my friend Vasi . . . has given me his passport." Six in the morning, and his friend *has given* him a passport *tonight*? Well, a small matter.

On page 41, not so small. Fabrizio at the battle of Waterloo (where he famously wonders in the midst of shot and shell if it is a real battle he is in) allows his horse to jump into a ditch full of rain water—which sends up a great splash (*ce qui fit rejaillir l'eau à une hauteur considérable*) that drenches a general. Madly, the translation says: "this raised the water level considerably." Now of course the translator knows what *rejailler* means. It's just carelessness. In the preceding sentence the "water level" of the ditch is mentioned, and somehow "water level" got into the following sentence too, and stayed there as the translator rushed furiously on. The only other explanation I can imagine is an attempt to give a humorous twist—Stendhal notoriously being such a humorist—to the clause which it doesn't have.

On page 199, Fabrizio is confessing his sins in church according to a Latin self-interrogatory taught him by his Jesuit instructors. Coming to simony, he passes over it without a thought, though he is going along with a scheme by which he is to be made archbishop solely through Count Mosca's influence. However—the English text runs, turning the French backsides-front—"had someone offered to give him a hundred louis to become" the vicar of the archbishop, "he would have rejected such a notion with horror." But what Stendhal wrote is: "if someone had proposed that he [Fabrizio] should give a hundred louis" to get himself made the vicar of the archbishop (*Si on lui eût proposé de donner cent louis pour devinir . . . vicaire.*)

On page 305, the French *morale*, meaning "morals," is mistranslated as "morale" to produce a baffling sentence. On page 328 the sentence "Loyal to her resolve not to drag the Count to his ruin, [the Duchess Sanseverina] was punished for her cruelty toward this poor man" makes no sense. It

1 *The Charterhouse of Parma*, by Stendahl, translated from the French by Richard Howard; The Modern Library, 507 pages, $24.95.

2 After writing this, I remebered the excellent translation of *Lucien Leuwen* by Louise Varèse. When I went to it to test my recollection, I lost myself completely in the rereading.

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turns out a clause is missing: "loyal to her resolve not to drag the Count to his ruin, *she would not see him more than twice a month; but* she was punished for her cruelty," etc.

I was startled near the end of the novel by the preposterous figure of "eleven hundred and fifty thousand francs," given as the salary a government post paid (page 408)—the correct figure is eleven hundred and fifty. So when, turning the pages, my eye happened to light on the number "ten" (page 383, the Duchess is allowing the faithful Ludovic "ten days" recreation before he releases the reservoir's waters on Parma), I thought to look at the French. The number is two. Not all numbers in the text are incorrect, I'm sure, but at least two are.

The young prince Ernesto on succeeding to the throne also succeeds to his father's ambition to possess the universally desired Duchess Sanseverina, which he is able to accomplish by extortion: she promises to become his mistress if he will only free Fabrizio from his tower prison and from imminent death by poisoning at the hands of the prison governor. The royal ninny's consciousness of having done something difficult makes a different man of him for a while: "he became susceptible to general ideas" (page 442). This seems strange. But perhaps Ernesto has begun to think. However, what the prince does in the next paragraph has nothing to do with "general ideas": he makes a number of generous decisions (and even thinks of appointing the duchess his prime minister!). The abused French sentence is: *il devint sensible aux généraux raisonnements*—"he became responsive to magnanimous considerations."

Really, it is too ridiculous to misread *généraux* as "general," and then turn *raisonnements* into "ideas," and then fail to catch this and other mistakes at the editorial stage. (But was there an editorial stage?) No one seems to have read the manuscript, or later on the proofs, with any attention, neither an editor, editors today being too busy with business to read, which they don't like doing anyhow (I ask forgiveness of the exceptions), nor the translator, worn out by racing to complete the translation (as he tells us) in some six months.

A last instance, and a particularly gross one. It follows the great scene in chapter XIV in which the duchess threatens to leave Parma unless the elder Ernesto cancels the murder sentence hanging over Fabrizio. Outraged, the autocrat nevertheless shudders at the prospect of the pall of boredom that will descend on Parma if she leaves; he signs the letter of capitulation Count Mosca takes down at the duchess's dictation. Later on Count Mosca is afraid the prince might put Fabrizio to death in "revenge for the duchess's tone the day she sent him the fatal letter" (page 282). But there was no letter *sent* to the prince. The entire business took place in the prince's study. The letter that the duchess *sent*, to the archbishop, after returning home, was a copy of the one the prince signed.

How could the translator misremember so brilliant a scene only forty pages later and mistranslate completely a reference to it? It's more than carelessness, it's a lack of seriousness.

This little collection of *slips* (to italicize in the Stendhal style) was gathered from reading one part and another of the work against the French. What might one expect from a systematic comparison of the original with the whole translation? But leaving "slips" aside, what about the quality of the writing; how well does this version read? It runs on unexceptionally, though with nothing like Stendhal's adroitness, till you run into a literalism, a clumsy sentence, or an absolutely muddled one (such as the sentence about the ladders on page 389), which you do often. Some of Stendhal's irony comes through, some of his wit, which no translation could avoid. Perhaps some of the literalisms are an effort to do what previous translations hardly try to do, render the Beylean abruptness and brevities, the *accourcis*. If so, it is not successful. Thus, commenting on the scheme of the amiable Machiavellian, Count Mosca, to make his dearly loved mistress, Gina Pietranera, a

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duchess by marrying her to the sixty-eight-year-old Duke Sanseverina (who would be rewarded with a Grand Cordon and in return instantly disappear from Parma) and so qualify her for court society—commenting on this, as I say, the narrator excuses his recounting such "highly immoral acts" as follows: Is it "his fault if the characters, seduced by passions he does not share, unfortunately for himself," do such things? It is true that they "are no longer done in a country [France] where the sole passion surviving all the rest is for money, the means of vanity" ("*l'argent, moyen de vanité*," page 105). The quick phrase, apothegmatic, works in French; in English it misfires because it is unidiomatic. Shaw and Mauldon both expanded the phrase to make it English, at the cost of brevity. The efforts of all three fail. It is the kind of thing that makes Stendhal difficult.

Another interesting instance. Clélia Conti is the daughter of the governor of the prison high up in whose tower Fabrizio is confined. Remorsefully, against her duty to her father, she falls in love with him and he with her, across the empty space between her window in the governor's *palazzo* and Fabrizio's in his cell. When he mimics to her sawing wood, for his window is about to be covered with a shutter, this signal is too blatant for Clélia's filial conscience; she doesn't appear for several days. Her non-appearance puts Fabrizio in a rage, about which he then says to himself: "Anger for anger, I should have told her that I loved her" (page 310)—*Colère pour colère, j'aurais dû lui dire que je l'aimais*. "Anger for anger" is very murky; the French too seems at fault, too "clipped," to use Stendhal's own word. Here is my attempt at an elucidation: "Now she's angry and I'm angry—so I might as well have [gone on, been hung for a sheep as for a lamb, and] told her that I love her." The phrase in question is hard to nail down; maybe I take it too far, or in the wrong direction. But it has to be taken somewhere, it mustn't be left literal, which is to say blank, as Howard does.

Howard leans for support, leans hard, on the earlier versions, which is perfectly all right—that is what translators do. Mauldon leans on Shaw. Maybe they all lean on Scott-Moncrieff whose *Charterhouse* I don't have to hand. What is not all right is the way translators don't acknowledge the help they get from predecessors. What is also not all right is making insignificant little revisions and passing them off a retranslation. But that is what publishers want to advertise, retranslations not revisions. If Proust weren't so long, we would have ten more translations of him by now, all basically Scott-Moncrieff nearly as much as the several revisions of his translation that have been made.

Shaw's translation is a perfectly respectable one. She over-Englished, but what is one to do with the laconic French? Still, so much prolixity. (One instance of her over-Englishing, not prolix, I remember well: "The Jew landlord of their lodgings," she wrote. This bit of Anglo-Saxon linguistic brutality is not Stendhal's.) I don't know whether I prefer Shaw's or Mauldon's version; I think Shaw's, though Mauldon made a lot of felicitous changes.

Howard in his afterword associates the twenty-eight weeks he took to translate the five-hundred-page novel with Stendhal's seven weeks plus to compose it. I find his putting himself on a level with Stendhal in this way as presumptuous as it is meaningless—for composition and translation, and so composition-time and translation-time, are two quite different things. But from this one understands one reason for the translation's frivolous carelessness.

Choreographed artifice

Nicholas Fox Weber
Balthus: A Biography.
Alfred A. Knopf, 644 pages, $40

reviewed by Merlin James

Nicholas Fox Weber adopts an interesting biographical technique for his hefty book

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on Balthus. He does not offer straight, researched reconstructions of the events, social circles, and physical environments of the painter's life. Nor does he try to evoke for us a linear narrative of his subject's developing character, domestic circumstances, or spiritual progress. Rather what we get is, so to speak, a report on "How I Wrote a Book about Balthus." We hear about Weber's early admiration for and first approaches to the painter, about his subsequent meetings and interviews, about his stays as a houseguest at the artist's chalet in the Alps, about his encounters with Balthus's surviving friends and with those who modelled for figure compositions or sat for portraits. We have accounts of Weber's trips to see certain Balthus paintings in public collections around the world or in the mansions and penthouses of tycoons. Much of the book is thus in the present tense—a prolonged rumination in which Weber takes us through his own adventure in "figuring out" Balthus's elusiveness, his wily intrigues, his self-absorption, his picaresque social climbing.

All this is punctuated with readings of, and responses to, individual paintings. Their spellbinding power Weber accounts for by the way they invite yet resist erotic projection; provoke yet do not satisfy narrative curiosity; and transform the painter's own experience and the masterpieces of past art that influence him. Balthus's desire to manipulate and control, to elude responsibility, evade comprehension, possess and dominate the objects of his fascination—these traits are seen as inhering in both the man and his art.

By continually pairing themes in Balthus's life and work, Weber manages to cover a good deal of factual material without resorting to a straight chronological narrative. He structures his book thematically, with sections on recurrent motifs or key paintings in Balthus's art (*The Window*, *The Cat at the Mirror*, *The Street*, *The Guitar Lesson*), on key figures in Balthus's life (Derain, Miró), and on his influences (Piero, Courbet). Only a few chapters hang on specific periods or episodes from his career, such as his time as director and restorer of the French Academy's villa in Rome, or his years at the ramshackle chateau of Chassy, living on proceeds from a small syndicate of collectors. The reader picks up, piecemeal, a quantity of information about Balthus's associations with writers such as Jouve and Artaud, his gradually growing stature among critics, his progress with dealers, collectors, and curators from Pierre Loeb in Paris to Pierre Matisse, James Thrall Soby, and Alfred Barr in America. Friendships with Malraux, Camus, and Bataille are also touched upon. These secondary characters do not especially come to life in Weber's retelling, and the book does not bespeak huge intimacy with the interwar European art world (as demonstrated, perhaps, by misspellings here of the names of the German sculptor Arno Breker and the French writer Jean Paulhan).

Nevertheless there are useful considerations of where Balthus stands in relation to Surrealism, to counter-avant-gardism in French painting (Derain is defended against charges of merely reactionary conservatism), to contemporaries such as Morandi (whom Balthus admires), Picasso (who owned an important work by him), and Giacometti. His deep intimacy with the latter cooled after the 1930s, we learn, but after the sculptor's death Balthus chose to forget the later estrangement. His (and Giacometti's) admiration for Derain as an artist—an admiration Weber shares—is discussed especially carefully, with Balthus's reluctance to fully affirm, nowadays, the older artist's greatness being astutely noted as indicating a continued competitiveness. On this topic, as elsewhere, the book draws on opinions that the painter Leland Bell (on whom Weber has written a monograph) strenuously asserted in his lifetime—that Derain, Giacometti, and Balthus became a "triumvirate" in the 1930s, the three musketeers of high humanist figuration. Balthus's emulation, shared with Derain, of old masters such as Piero, Caravaggio, or Poussin is de-

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picted as a brave resistance to the obsession with innovation in much modernism; but the case may be being overstated as traditionalist strains were of course pervasive through European twentieth-century art.

Balthus, meanwhile, has always been scornful of "biographical heresy." According to him, knowledge of, or speculation on, his own life is irrelevant to the proper appreciation of his paintings. This applies both to his social and domestic "outer" life and to his inner psychological life. Psychoanalytical criticism of his work is especially anathematized. Yet, Weber demonstrates, he is always using the raw materials of his life for his work. He paints the people he knows, the artists he relates to, the women and lovers who mesmerize him and whom he seeks to subjugate in return. Psychoanalysis, the absurdity and irrelevance of which is so over-protested by the artist, is shown to have been surely a conscious preoccupation, especially in the 1930s, when Freud was a major interest for Balthus's brother Pierre Klossowski and their mutual circles. Perverse eroticism, also vetoed by the painter in any discussion of his work, is similarly demonstrated to have been a major concern and creative source for him and his associates such as the Sade enthusiast (and descendant) Marie de Noailles. One of Weber's interpretative coups is to posit the dominatrix in the famously erotic *Guitar Lesson* (1934) as a transsexualized depiction of Balthus himself.

Early on, Weber describes Balthus warning him not to be over-biographical or psychoanalytical in his book. By not producing a conventional cradle-to-grave portrait of the artist, Weber is perhaps seeming to comply with the artist's wish. But he in fact does exactly what Balthus most feared, implying that the life and the art are windows onto, or mirrors of, each other. Thus he connects, say, the sadomasochistic traits in the paintings partly to Balthus's conflicted feelings for his mother when young, when he was devoted to her, but also no doubt jealous at her passion for the poet Rilke. (Rilke nevertheless doted on the child prodigy and became a mentor and friend to him.)

Weber sees the paintings, too, as a grand attempt to overcome the artist's own profound sense of insecurity and loss. There was the loss of Rilke, whom he and his mother so adored, dying when Balthus was eighteen. There was even the disappearance of the beloved cat Mitsou, when Balthus was just twelve, which resulted in the series of drawings that effectively launched his career. (Rilke had them published and Bonnard acclaimed them.) This, for Weber, is the first manifestation of a preoccupation in Balthus's work with the elusiveness of that which is desired—be it youth, rapture, inspiration, contentment, sexual or spiritual realization, or the exulted presentness to a full experience of the world. The characters in his figure compositions are caught within such dramas of desire and nostalgia, Weber suggests, while their creator has learned to find a defense against the sense of helplessness by achieving mastery, self-possession, absolute independence. Balthus's willful pursuit of sexual partners, his cruel replacement of one for another in his affections, his demands that they tolerate his infidelities, his desire for eternal renewal in his choice of a sequence of young lovers, his occasional sadism—all this is presented as relevant to the paintings' meanings. Even his suicide attempt over a love affair in 1934 is suggested as having its place in his creative life, to have been a choreographed artifice: the scene composed like a picture, designed for Antonin Artaud to discover just in time to save the prone painter from a carefully judged laudanum overdose.

Such is the almost inevitable premise of the book: that the paintings are illuminated by the life, and the life is of interest because from it have issued important works of art. They articulate realities which we all feel, even if we do not have unusual lives ourselves, and Balthus is thus an exemplary human being, for all his mendacity, callousness, and self-obsession, because he has turned his life into art with fierce and bril-

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liant honesty. All the artist's denials of autobiography in the paintings (and his idealization of Piero della Francesca as the perfect genius of whom no historical facts are known) emerge, then, as a ruse adopted precisely because Balthus is so entirely living his art. Indeed, his desire to cultivate enigma, his notorious clouding of his own personal history, denial of his partial Jewishness, and extravagant claims to nobility or to descendency from famous writers—these themselves become a main subject of Weber's analysis. Balthus's is surely a classic enough case of Freudian "Family Romance" (and surely also consciously cultivated in the knowledge that at some level the conceit is transparent), but Weber treats it endlessly. He sees it again as reflected in the work, especially in the many crypto-self-portraits, usually turned away from the viewer. Balthus's elaborate self-defense mechanisms originate partly, Weber seems to feel, in the urge to rise out of poverty and to occlude the unthinkable possibility of victimization during the Nazi period. Balthus sought to reinvent the self as secure, to be not just socially assimilated but super-assimilated—discovered, as in a fairy-tale, to be true nobility.

In many ways, however, the paradoxes and ambiguities of Balthus's life/work relationship are those that pertain for any artist, and the lengthy obsessing on them in this book borders on the wearying. (In a different sort of study, the question of Balthus's phony nobility would be dealt with in a paragraph.) Altogether, there remains something uneasy in the effect of this book's treatment of the facts and the fictions of Balthus's living and limning. Weber presents himself as the honest researcher, devoted to the artist's vision, seeking to understand it better, beguiled by Balthus's personality also, but determined not to be manipulated as so many others have been—whether friends of the man or critics of his art. We watch Weber winning the trust of Balthus and his family, letting them believe he will perpetrate the artist's own authorized version, and correct existing accounts of his career of which Balthus disapproves. All the while Weber is tipping us the wink, letting us know that we can rely on him for a disabused view, uncorrupted by the heady drug of intimacy with this mythical genius. (Balthus, perhaps growing wary of his guest, reminds him of an anecdote from the English thinker Francis Bacon, about an incident seen in the street through a window: Bacon watched the passersby each interpreting the scene from their individual points of view—none had definitive comprehension.)

It is not that one doubts Weber's picture of Balthus's less attractive traits in this book, or of the slight vanity into which he and his family seem to have slipped. But is it any of our business? That the paintings invite some speculation about their creator does not in the end justify the degree of attention here. The only thing that would justify it would be, perhaps, the construction of a more conventionally thoroughgoing biographical story, from a specific point of view inevitably, but fashioned as an artifact with its own organic and moral coherence. Few art biographies today attempt such undeconstructed, integrated cohesion; they often remain in a hinterland between art criticism, art history, and society-page reporting.

Weber is at his best when he turns to the paintings and tries to account for their force, less in terms of those themes of self and other, reality and imagination, inner and outer worlds, than of the specific expressive character of individual canvases. He examines the strange distortions of bodies, now elongated, now curiously inflated, often disproportionate, that create much of the atmosphere in Balthus's work. Sometimes the otherworldliness comes partly from the figures' almost extraterrestrial appearance. Weber discusses the luminosity of the surfaces, too, their crusty beauty, and the sombre geometry of the compositions. He is admirably clear about the late decline of the work into more superficial stylistic and decorative formulae, with just occasional revivals of genius. He hints at more

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developed readings of paintings also, and one is left hungry for further critical analysis of the pictures reproduced here. What demands more attention, among other things, is exactly how the painter makes tenable the density and fullness of illusion, formal resolution, associative meaning and traditional reference, all of which seemed like so much excess baggage to so many modern painters.

A Balthus catalogue raisonné is due out shortly, which will by its nature do what the artist is always insisting upon—draw attention to the paintings on their own terms. Weber's life will remain a stimulating meditation on themes and issues in the work and their relation to some (at least, at last reliable) facts about the man.

Emotional vampire

Carlos L. Dews, editor Illumination & Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers. University of Wisconsin Press, 234 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Brooke Allen

To call Carson McCullers an eccentric, as some have done, is one of the great understatements of all time. McCullers was deeply, prodigiously weird. Sensitive and vulnerable to an almost pathological degree (the actress Anne Baxter called her "skinless"), she was also a tough survivor, ruthlessly advancing her own agenda and interests at the expense of those she purported to love; "I always felt Carson was a destroyer," her sometime friend Elizabeth Bowen commented, "for which reason I chose never to be closely involved with her." McCullers was a monstrous egoist, who put her own talents second to none. ("I have *more* to say than Hemingway, and God knows, I say it *better* than Faulkner," she once asserted, wrongly.) She was an emotional parasite; even her cousin Jordan Massee, who loved her dearly, admitted that "Carson is more demanding than anyone else I have ever known." Lillian Hellman, who did *not* love her, complained that "Carson burdened everyone who got close to her. If you wanted burdens, liked burdens, you accepted Carson and her affection. I don't like such burdens." As for McCullers's sex life, to this day no one seems to be able to figure out just what she did and didn't get up to, although some have suggested that she and her husband, Reeves McCullers, could be aptly described by that well-known limerick,

> There once was a fairy named Bloom
> Took a lesbian up to his room.
> They argued all night
> About who had the right
> To do what, and with which, and to whom.

McCullers died in 1967 at the age of fifty, after many years of invalidism brought on by a series of strokes. Her self-mythologizing and downright lying would make the biographer's task a difficult one, as those who knew her were aware: "Our girl was given to saying pretty much anything that came into her head," her friend Edward Newhouse said. "If I were given the choice of writing her biography or being shipwrecked on a desert island with Spiro Agnew . . . well, I don't know." Virginia Spencer Carr, an intrepid Southerner, took on the unenviable job and in 1975 produced a very thorough biography that for all its many faults and occasional lapses of taste and insight must be acknowledged a definitive work and one that throws fascinating and often lurid light on its odd subject. Other, less exhaustive, studies have followed.

McCullers left behind very little in the way of autobiographical material and what there is of it—some seventy pages of almost egregiously unrevealing reminiscences dictated during the three months before she suffered her fatal stroke—should, mostly because of her congenital dishonesty, have been deemed unpublishable. But in today's commercial climate nothing is too thin, too

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feeble, too irrelevant to be unpublishable so long as it comes with a famous name attached. And so now, more than thirty years after McCullers's death, the University of Wisconsin Press has decided to dust off the aborted embryo, pad it out with Carson's and Reeves's previously unpublished wartime correspondence and the original twenty-page outline for what was to become *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and publish the whole shebang as part of the Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography series, under the title *Illumination & Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers.*

In an interview with Rex Reed not long before her death, McCullers gave her reasons for attempting an autobiography:

> I think it is important for future generations of students to know why I did certain things, but it is also important for myself. I became an established literary figure overnight, and I was much too young to understand what happened to me or the responsibility it entailed. I was a bit of a holy terror. That, combined with all my illnesses, nearly destroyed me. Perhaps if I trace and preserve for other generations the effect this success had on me it will prepare future artists to accept it better.

Fat chance! And in any case, though McCullers's early success cannot have improved her character or her always fragile emotional state, it did not make her a holy terror: she was already that, long before her first fiction was published.

Carson McCullers was born Lula Carson Smith in 1917 in Columbus, Georgia, where she spent the first seventeen years of her life. Like many another precocious child she was abetted by a doting parent, in this case her mother, Marguerite, who when still pregnant informed her friends that secret prenatal signs indicated that the child was destined to be a great artist. Carson's relationship with her mother was to be intense and avidly needy on both sides throughout the two women's lives; in the early years it was tempered by the presence of Carson's rational, quiet father, a jeweller.

Little Lula showed evidence of musical talent, and her mother decided that she should train as a concert pianist. The child, who longed for fame and notoriety at any cost, went along with the plan happily enough and devoted long hours of every day to her piano studies, while her teacher, Mary Tucker, became the first in a long line of people, both male and female, on whom McCullers was to focus her passionate affection and insatiable craving for love.

At the age of seventeen, Carson (she had dropped the Lula four years earlier, much as her adolescent heroine Frankie would later transform herself into F. Jasmine Addams in *The Member of the Wedding*) departed for New York, ostensibly to study at Juilliard. But in fact her dreams of a musical career were fading as she discovered a new affinity for writing, and once in the city she attended creative writing classes at Columbia and New York University while supporting herself with a series of unexciting jobs. In 1935 she met Reeves McCullers, an attractive and bright young serviceman from Alabama, as sexually ambiguous as she was herself. They were married in 1937, only a few months after Carson's first published fiction appeared in *Story* magazine.

The rollercoaster aspect of marriage to Reeves, who was to provide both the most supportive and the most destructive relationship of Carson's life, began almost immediately. The "pre-nup" was that Reeves should support them for a year while Carson wrote, and then she would do the same for him. Carson's year of writing produced *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), a stunning success that made her a bigtime literary star at the absurd age of twenty-three; after that, of course, it was curtains for any similar ambitions Reeves might have had. Could he have been a good writer? Probably not, but we'll never know now. Rather than seizing an equal partnership in the marriage, he accepted the supporting role of helping Carson to realize her genius to the fullest. He went to the office,

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shopped, kept house, and generally ministered to the delicate prodigy, services she grudgingly acknowledged in *Illumination & Night Glare*: "I was completely absorbed in my work, and if the food burned up he never chided me." It would have been rather surprising if he had chided her, for it was he who did the cooking.

Reeves was also expected to turn a blind eye to Carson's never-ending string of amours, the most serious of which was her infatuation with Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach, a glamorous Swiss intellectual Carson met in 1940. Depressed, Reeves developed an extramarital relationship of his own with the composer David Diamond, to whom he confided his many troubles.

> We simply are not husband and wife any more, David. It just doesn't make sense our staying together. When I come home, she either is there or is not there, without any explanation. Sometimes she comes home early in the morning, sometimes not. After all, she sleeps with whom she pleases, sees whom she wants. I'm not a husband any longer.

A strange three-way relationship between Reeves, Carson, and Diamond was soon to develop and to become one of the central events in Carson's life, setting the pattern for her lifelong propensity for triangular situations and providing material for both *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951). It is entirely omitted, however, from this "memoir," along with almost all other material of a very personal nature.

A heavy drinker even at the best of times—as was Carson herself—Reeves now hit the bottle ever harder and began to show signs of the instability that would eventually take over and wreck his life. The couple separated in 1940, after Carson sold *Reflections in a Golden Eye* to *Harper's Bazaar*, and she moved into a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights with George Davis, the literary editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, and W. H. Auden. It was a notorious household that would over the course of a few years come to include Gypsy Rose Lee, Benjamin Britten, Virgil Thompson, Paul and Jane Bowles, Richard Wright, and Oliver Smith, among many others. Carson stayed there less than a year. She and Reeves were divorced in 1941.

She spent the war years working on *The Member of the Wedding* and, on the death of her father, moved with her mother to Nyack, New York. Marguerite Smith spent the rest of her life there and the house also functioned as home base for the more peripatetic Carson, and for her long-suffering younger sister Rita, who as the only really sane woman in this trio, as well as the least self-indulgent, inevitably had to put in a good deal of time as caregiver in both the physical and emotional senses of the word.

And as the war drew to an end Carson found herself once again in passionate correspondence with Reeves, who participated in the Normandy landings and fought in France, Luxembourg, Belgium, and Germany. Still "in love"—whatever that might mean!—they decided to remarry.

In *Illumination & Night Glare* McCullers is characteristically shifty about her reasons for remarrying.

> I don't know why I felt I owed such devotion to him. Perhaps it was simply because he was the only man I had ever kissed [a likely story!] and the awful tyranny of pity. I knew he was not faithful to me sexually, but that did not matter to me, nor am I an especially maternal woman. . . . For some reason, certainly against my will, we became deeply involved with each other again and before I really knew what had happened, we were remarried.

Never mind that in 1945 she was writing to Reeves, "Our love for each other is like a sort of natural law, independent of our separate wills, inalterable by circumstances." Reeves's own later rationalization for the remarriage was simpler and more to the point: "I think we are all drones—and Carson is the queen bee."

The second marriage proved even more

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disastrous than the first. Carson's wave continued to rise, cresting in the Broadway triumph of *The Member of the Wedding*, which won both the New York Drama Critics' Circle and the Donaldson Awards. Reeves, whose only real success in life had been in the Army (he was highly decorated during the Second World War), was unable to find a place for himself. His drinking, accompanied now by bouts of paranoia and despair, escalated. In 1952, while the couple was living for a short time in France, his talk of suicide, and even of the two of them making a suicide pact, began to frighten Carson. One day while they were driving to a forest for a woodland walk she looked into the back seat and spied two coiled ropes. In a panic, she got out of the car and hitchhiked home. She never saw Reeves again; not long afterward he succeeded in killing himself.

Like a phoenix, Carson rose renewed and one might almost say refreshed from Reeves's ashes. From this point she spoke of him—as she does in *Illumination & Night Glare*—as though he had been, for her, no more than a strange aberration, and many of her friends were distressed by the constant bad-mouthing she dealt him. Tennessee Williams, normally supportive of Carson in nearly every instance, was especially dismayed: "She spoke of him in the most unkind terms, and it always upset me. Reeves died for her, yet she refused to admit it." Another friend, Simone Brown, said that

> what Reeves did for Carson was beyond human endurance. He loved her too much —just as we all did. Carson had a terrible power of destruction. She destroyed everything around her—everything she loved. Yet she also wanted to give. It was a viperish thing —all involved in a rather unusual cycle of love. One can see it in her works. Certainly *The Ballad of the Sad Café* illustrates that power of destruction.

Although Carson's health was increasingly frail she traveled when she could, enjoying her role as an international celebrity and the hospitality of friends all over Europe and America. She also worked on another play, *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958). The play turned out to be a flop but it brought her a new lover, the Broadway producer Arnold Saint Subber. When she died in 1967 Carson McCullers was physically wasted and had not written anything of substance for fifteen years, but as a literary "personality" she was still at the top of her game.

Simone Brown's comment on McCullers's character and the way it is reflected in the fiction is very much to the point: McCullers had a devouring wish for love, and her love object, once attained, would in turn be devoured and drained by her voracious needs. More than one of her friends characterized her as an emotional vampire. "To know Carson well, as a friend," said Saint Subber, "was an occupation that took 100 percent of your time. Even going to the bathroom was something you shared with her, as you did every intimate detail." Those who stayed friends with her over a period of years and continued to love and be loved by her tended to be those diplomatic souls, like Tennessee Williams or Carson's cousin Jordan Massee, who appeared to provide infinite love and support but in reality drew boundaries and maintained a necessary distance.

Illumination & Night Glare is blandly opaque, almost in the manner of the Andy Warhol diaries. For anyone who knows much about McCullers's life, the omissions are so many, and so obvious, as to make the whole enterprise ridiculous. The publication of what the University of Wisconsin Press is pleased to call a "memoir" serves no purpose: aside from a few charming reminiscences and a couple of interesting thoughts on the creative process, it tells us nothing truthful about this most bizarre of characters. McCullers's friend Robert Walden hoped that she would not be "depicted biographically for posterity cloaked in white or wearing a halo. She was a bitch, and I

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don't want her coming out looking like an angel." *Illumination & Night Glare* does, unfortunately, make McCullers look more angelic than she was, and it would be a pity if unwary readers took her at her own valuation of herself. The reality is far less palatable, but also far more interesting.

Seeing is revealing

Piero Boitani
The Bible and Its Rewritings.
Oxford University Press, 231 pages, £35

reviewed by Paul Dean

At each end of this book is a biblical encounter with the Other, an apprehension of the numinous. It begins with the visit to Abraham of three mysterious figures, described in Genesis 18, who inform him that Sarah, his aged wife, is to conceive a son, and warn him to flee the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The episode, in which Abraham's visitors are sometimes referred to as "he," sometimes as "they," was interpreted by St. Augustine as a prefiguration of the doctrine of the Trinity, and prompted one of the masterpieces of Russian icon-painting, *The Hospitality of Abraham (The Trinity)* by Andrei Rublev. Its rewriting began as early as the New Testament story of the Annunciation, in which the three visitors become the archangel Gabriel, Abraham and Sarah become Joseph and Mary, but the news of the miraculous birth and the warning to escape the wrath to come (in this case Herod's) remain. The Bible is never a closed book, even to itself, and a major strand of Professor Boitani's argument is that it not only promises, but also possesses, eternal life, being endlessly renewed in subsequent literary avatars.

Like Abraham, Mary recognizes the divine because she is open to that possibility. Towards the end of his book, Boitani evokes another visitation to another Mary, in John 20. Weeping in the garden of Gethsemane, she at first takes the stranger whom she meets for the gardener. Only when she hears the familiar voice naming her does she realize it is Jesus, a Jesus both recognizable and unknown. John's treatment of the post-Resurrection era is wonderfully nuanced. The beloved disciple at the empty tomb "saw, and believed" that Jesus had risen; Mary sees him, is forbidden to touch him, but acclaims him as Lord; Thomas, after both seeing him and touching him, adores him as God, but is told "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed"—which returns us to the beginning and sets the journey of faith going in perpetual motion. At this point, as Boitani finely says:

> We reach the ultimate threshold at which to decide, each of us, whether to recognize, or recognize and believe; where recognition can be a god as long as we give ourselves to him: as long as, like Mary Magdalene, we listen to his voice.

"To recognize is a god" is a quotation from a non-biblical text, the *Helen* of Euripedes, and it is to the ancient world, or to Shakespeare, that we must go for secular parallels to scenes such as those from John's Gospel—to the reunions of Penelope and Odysseus, or of Pericles and Marina. Shakespeare's was a Christian imagination, and in his story of the psychic death and resurrection of Pericles through his meeting with the daughter he believed long dead, he is unprecedentedly daring: for it is women—Marina, or Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*—who make the Christlike appearances in his late plays, men being cast as disciples whose faith in the healing power of love is restored. Shakespeare echoes the biblical implication: your eyes will not be opened until you are ready for them to be. To borrow a phrase from *King Lear*, you must be able to say, "I see it feelingly."

Such a vision is unforgettably shown later in Genesis, in the narrative—superbly analyzed by Boitani—of Joseph and his brothers. The brothers at first do not "see" that the Egyptian potentate is their own

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Joseph, but are brought to that insight only by correctly interpreting the clues he gives them. In this they are like the disciples in the New Testament stories of the appearances of the resurrected Christ (and tradition long regarded Joseph as a prefiguration of Jesus.) A sign is only a sign if you see that it is, and know what it signifies. Human and divine meet in signs which are both material and spiritual (for Christians, the supreme example is the bread and wine in the Eucharist); our "reading" of God is a decoding of signs, but in a profounder sense than any deconstructionist can conceive. The signs act as triggers of buried memories, which now resurface into a context where their true meaning can be grasped.

We think of this as a doctrine of Romanticism, but although Wordsworth gave it abstract formulation it was perfectly understood much earlier, by Dante for instance. In our own time it has been central to the work of Mann and Proust. Benjamin, in Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*, first suspects Joseph's identity when his memory of the scents of his childhood is activated. That is markedly Proustian—and we might add that *A la recherche du temps perdu* also moves towards a moment of *anagnorisis*, the narrator's realization that the kingdom of his novel is within himself. His whole life, he now sees, has been "a vocation," a paving of the way for its transfiguration into art. Like Joyce at the end of *Portrait of the Artist*, Proust presents his narrator's conscious articulation of the aesthetic principles upon which the novel leading up to them has been written.

That sense of the artist as at once harbinger and creator of miraculous progeny is strong in the high priests of literary modernism. Mann makes the narrator of his *Joseph* meditate on his own godlike position, an omnipotent author who is both inside and outside the story. Eliot in "Marina," his reworking of *Pericles*, creates what Boitani beautifully calls "a lyric not of being and knowing, but of the whisper of being, and the shadow of knowing," capturing the moments *preceding* the recognition (to be more amply, but hardly more hauntingly, documented in *Four Quartets*). Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses* rewrites Genesis and Exodus, providing multilayered styles and perspectives, complex genealogies, narratives of enslavement and liberation, and a conclusion in which a corpse, that of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp, literally goes down, from Illinois to Mississippi, a southward journey which does not lead to Canaan in an America far from being the Promised Land.

Like his mentor, the late J. A. W. Bennett, Boitani is a medievalist whose erudition transcends the formal categories, as, after all, that of a true medievalist should. His detailed readings of scripture, Shakespearean drama, and modern poetry and fiction are compelling, often brilliant, often also wayward and wire-drawn—but never dull. In examining Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, he is, however, on home ground. This is a story whose literal and symbolic meanings conflict outrageously, and it raises questions about conflicting interpretations of the Bible, which is both the divine word and human words. Dryden's statement, in his updating of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, that Christ's parables were "a pleasing way/ Sound sense by plain example to convey" is breathtakingly fatuous, even for him. The parables are so enigmatic that they remain potentially disastrous models for the preacher or storyteller. Chaucer knows this, so his beast-fable is also a work of theological exegesis dancing along the tightrope of uncertainty about "whether man is a rational animal, or an animal is a rational man," and committed to the belief that "human discourse about animal farms is not false, but true: as true as all fiction, as true as John's Gospel," in Boitani's words.

How true is that? Well, that's just the point. "Takyth the Fruyt," Chaucer's narrator urges us, "and lat the chaf be stille," but he makes it virtually impossible for us to distinguish the two. Nor, perhaps, should we, for, as Shakespeare was to say, "the truest poetry is the most feigning," and

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"everything written is written for our instruction," a Pauline text quoted not only in the *Tale* but in the "Retraction" to the *Canterbury Tales* themselves. What is written is *littera*; letters; literature. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is in the deepest sense a story about the processes of interpretation. Dryden's "The truth is a moral, though the tale a lie" betrays, as usual, an utter incomprehension of what Chaucer is doing.

The Bible and its Rewritings is nourishingly rich in texture, and has been marvelously translated from Italian by Anita Weston. Boitani takes his place by the side of Auerbach, Frye, Kermode, and Jospovici among others, who have written distinguished literary criticism of the Scriptures. If names keep occurring to the reader which Boitani has left out, that merely testifies to the fundamental rightness and importance of his thesis. I would want to add Rilke, whose work is saturated with angels and annunciations, and Lawrence, whose exultant closing words in "Song of a man who has come through" are a fitting gloss on Boitani's exciting book:

> What is the knocking?
> What is the knocking at the door in the night?
> It is somebody wants to do us harm.
>
> No, no, it is the three strange angels.
> Admit them, admit them.

Without dogma

William Logan
Reputations of the Tongue.
University Press of Florida,
274 pages, $34.95

reviewed by Paula Friedman

One of the things that chiefly distinguishes William Logan's thinking about poetry from that of other critics is the reasonable separation he grants between the poet and the poem. That is to say, Logan reads poetry neither as if it were a mirror of the poet's soul, nor does he read it, as post-structuralist theory demands, as mere "text," as a depersonalized artifact composed from all other poetic texts.

In *Reputations of the Tongue*, his second collection of essays and reviews, Logan opens with a discussion of T. S. Eliot's classic 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He lays out the points at which his thinking diverges from Eliot's, specifically regarding Eliot's ideas about "impersonality." Eliot believed that individual personality was often an impediment to genuine poetic expression. Consequently he suggested that the poet should seek the "extinction" of personality in order that the mind might function as a medium for the conveyance of impersonal poetic emotion, a neutral receptacle for "seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." Many critics have felt that an eerie passivity marks Eliot's theory of poetic creation (though Eliot did famously note that "of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things"). Logan promulgates a more active role for the poet. In "The Condition of the Individual Talent" he writes that "No poet succeeds without holding his personality in something like contempt. This doesn't mean the writer's highest state of development would be without personality at all." Logan neither extols the self nor expects it, as Eliot wished, to retire into the role of "catalyst." The word "contempt," however, suggests the degree to which Logan remains close to Eliot. His impatience with much contemporary verse is generally a reflection of an Eliot-like impatience with the merely personal.

In his essay "Beyond Psychology (Elizabeth Bishop)," Logan praises Bishop's poetry for its forays beyond the self, but faults two studies of the work essentially because their writers, Lorrie Goldensohn (*Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poet*)

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and Bonnie Costello (*Questions of Mastery*), try to force meaning at the expense of subtlety. Goldensohn misreads the imagery in "Going to the Bakery," referring to the poem as one "where neither the foreign American resident nor the home government nor the helpless population is denied corrupt or unpleasant roles." Logan notes that Bishop's poem, with its closely observed and finely rendered detail, is too rich and nuanced to be reduced to "blatant politics." Both Goldensohn and Costello (though Logan feels the latter has read Bishop from a richer base), squander attention searching for one-to-one correspondences between the work and Bishop's life or surroundings, a pursuit destined to fail because great poetry "requires a transfiguration that removes it from simple analysis." Insisting on Bishop's subversiveness, Costello tries to remake the poet in her own image, losing "Bishop's messiness and scumbling, her delicacy, her emotional frailty, even her whimsicality."

Logan's sense of the separation between the poet and her words allows language a certain autonomy. Meaning can occur because of the pressure between the words themselves. While the poet composes the work, the result may not solely reflect what she has seen, thought, or felt:

> Every poem of value must have a residue. A residue is not a mystery or a withholding. It is a result of the continual ignition in the language, a combustion in the nearness of words. . . . In a minor poem the residue is small and easily exhausted but in the greatest it suffers a constant renewal.

His insight about linguistic residue guides Logan's judgments, and his readings of individual poems reflect a fine grasp of their distinct compositions. Logan's criticism also exhibits a knack for epigrammatic concision. In "Millions of Strange Shadows (James Merrill)," he writes that the short poems "have an elegance of surface that cannot conceal the brooding shapes within," and that "Merrill is not a serious poet whose wit defeats him; he moves toward

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seriousness only through his wit." Similarly, in "In and Out of the Avant," Logan faults Ginsberg, particularly in his late poems, for creating too little residue, relying instead on a "bald philosophizing" that permits no richness of meaning. While Logan appreciates Ashbery's gift for "a vague suggestiveness that is also a brilliant suggestiveness," he wryly notes that "a poet can live on the banality of ideas far longer than he can live on the banality of expression."

Contrary to fashion, Logan affirms qualities in poetry that other critics have neglected or summarily dismissed. In these plain-spoken days, artifice has fallen into disrepute, a situation that doesn't prevent Logan from writing with appreciation in "The Habits of Their Habitats" (Clampitt and Schnackenberg) about Amy Clampitt's pleasure in "pure ornamentation." A poet of place, Clampitt has also commanded Logan's respect for her own respectful relation to her surroundings: "Wherever she is, she takes possession, not by imposing onto the landscape the template of her own sensibility (as happens with poets of stronger temperaments like Auden, or more lurid ones like Lowell), but by engaging the intimacies within each horizon as if they were her own." Occasionally, Logan's efforts at concision backfire, as when he writes of Clampitt that "the most severe of her texts rely on their exchanges, not their emotions, and such poems are the terrain of their transition." But such clotted diction is the exception, and most readers will find Logan's commentary lucid and rewarding.

Logan gives to his critical assessments the same breadth and intensity of attention that he asks of poets, though in his shorter pieces he necessarily relies on summary. In "Chronicle of the Late Eighties," an overview devoting three or four paragraphs to each of the selected poets, he conveys his range of concerns, from subject and tone to meter and rhyme. Take, for example, what he has to say about Lucie Brock-Broido:

> Her attention to the headlines cannot wholly corrupt her verve and occasional humor ("Dogs bark because they always do in pastorals"). She seems to know what she's doing even when it's not worth doing well.

His less damning attention can be equally effective. About James Lasdun's work, Logan writes that it "shows that the effervescent shallowness of our culture can still be troubled by the careful shudder of meter or the possession of rhyme."

Logan's longer essays, such as "The Midnight of Nostalgia (Donald Justice)," "The Charity of the Mystery of Geoffrey Hill," and "The Absolute Unreasonableness of Geoffrey Hill," show his particular affinity for the temper and sensibility of those poets. In his essay on Justice, for example, Logan takes the opportunity to look at the function of nostalgia in poetry. Pointing out that the first use in English of the Greek neologism ("*nostos*, a return home, and *algos*, pain") dates only as far back as the eighteenth century, he grants that the notion itself has tended to remain "within the pathology of homesickness." Logan also makes an important distinction about this impulse: "But nostalgia isn't necessarily a wish to return to the past; it is the wish to be privileged to recall it. . . . Nostalgia is the refuge of poets for whom the current modes of reminiscence have been irremediably stained with sentiment." Poems reflecting an over-involvement with personal history, replete with mundane detail, represent the antithesis of Logan's interest in nostalgia. Rather, Logan's interest has to do with nostalgia's function as "anti-sentiment, as the canker within sentiment." Pointing out that Justice rarely uses the self to locate his dramas, Logan admires the poet's modernist detachment in which he makes undefensive use of the past as a source of "recovered plentitude." In *The Sunset Maker* (1987), Justice draws on history, not parasitically for its emotional value, but rather as way of enacting responsibility through the "measurement of loss." In fact, Logan points out, one of the strengths of Justice's poetry arises not from its withholding of

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emotion, but from its "withholding of confidence from emotion."

Just as Logan's allergy to over-confidence informs his readings, so his appreciation of reticence leads him to admire Geoffrey Hill's *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy*, a long poem faulted by several critics for misplaced nostalgia and defense of an indefensible past. But Logan points out that Hill's charity lies in his ability to consider the difficult case, that of Charles Peguy, a French poet who was killed early in World War I, and "not flinch from its ambiguous reach or its own ambivalent response." This willingness to face the ambiguity of the past, to scrutinize it within a framework of skepticism, is precisely what keeps nostalgia from serving merely sentimental purposes, from being overly confident of its feelings: "The inadequacy of contemporary poetry may lie in its confidence of feeling . . . and its absence of a knowledge susceptible to anything outside feeling." Yet even here Logan follows no party line. In "Natural Selections (W. D. Snodgrass)," he lists *Heart's Needle* (1959), Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1965) as three of the "half dozen distinguished books of the period," discussing the accomplishments of "that school so condescendingly called confessional." For Logan, each poet, each poem present a separate case, one that he judges without theory, dogma, or unnecessary recourse to the personal life, but rather by gauging the effect of the words on the page.

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Letters

Grotesque liberties

To the Editors:

Recently, we attended the Portland Opera's performance of Handel's opera *Giulio Cesare* with our fourteen-year-old son. Our experience paralleled many of the points made in Roger Kimball's article on "Sensation" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (November 1999). If *Giulio Cesare* has recently become a worldwide "repertory work," as the magazine *Opera* asserted in its August number, then patrons should be aware of the kinds of grotesque liberties that the "arts community," in Portland at least, feels licensed to take in performing this work.

Rather than presenting the glorious music of Handel and the powerful historical drama with the seriousness that the text deserves, Robert Bailey, general director of the Portland Opera, and Ken Cazan, the stage director, presented it as a crude farce designed to titillate the dissolute and offend the respectable. Mr. Bailey explained that this was done "to attract the next generation of opera fans" and to present "opera as a truly relevant and contemporary art form." In his own words, this meant using a "humorous approach" to "overt sexuality." He asserted that a "lighthearted approach to brutality suited the plot and echoed the media of today." Rather than aim at the lofty pathos of traditional baroque opera, the staging created an atmosphere which encouraged laughter at the threat of rape, laughter at simulated sado-masochism and oral sex, and laughter at the brandishing of automatic weapons and at handguns held to the head.

We left early and presented the opera with a written request for a refund, disregarding the "No Refunds" legend printed on the tickets and sending copies of our letter to the company's major public and private benefactors. When the refund was summarily refused, we pursued the matter through Oregon's Department of Justice. A performance billed as "baroque opera" assumes the high-minded nobility and grandeur traditionally associated with this period. Bailey's admission that the opera deliberately set about to "deliver the unexpected" and take a "bold departure" from tradition damaged his defense. Indeed, the kind of ludicrous, pornographic "departures" championed by the Portland Opera amounted to consumer fraud.

The Civil Enforcement Officer, "on behalf of the public at large," wrote to the Portland Opera suggesting that their organization consider changes in their advertising practices for performances in order to avoid complaints in the future and sent them a copy of the Unlawful Trade Practices Act, ORS 646.608. Ultimately, the opera did refund our money because they wouldn't defend the indefensible before the Portland public in the local media. It is thought the "arts community" today is impervious to criticism based on standards of taste, but our experience shows it is still subject to sanctions against fraud. Though it often pretends otherwise, not even the arts community can remake language on a whim.

Reilly & Kerri Jones
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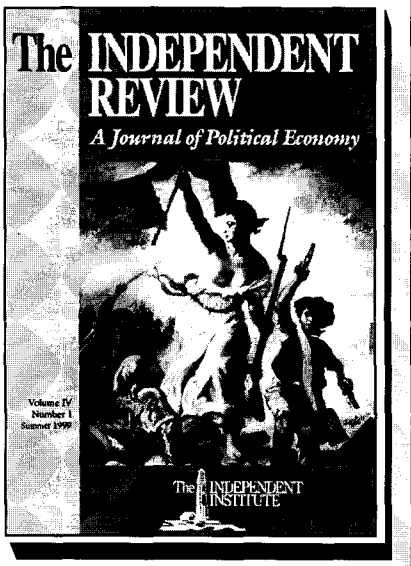

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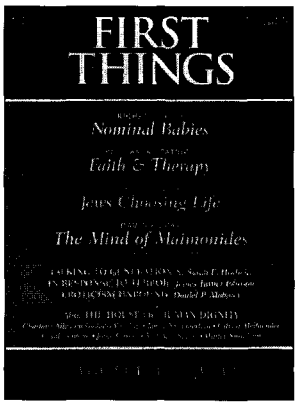

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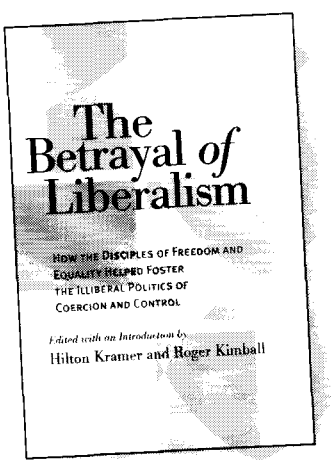
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